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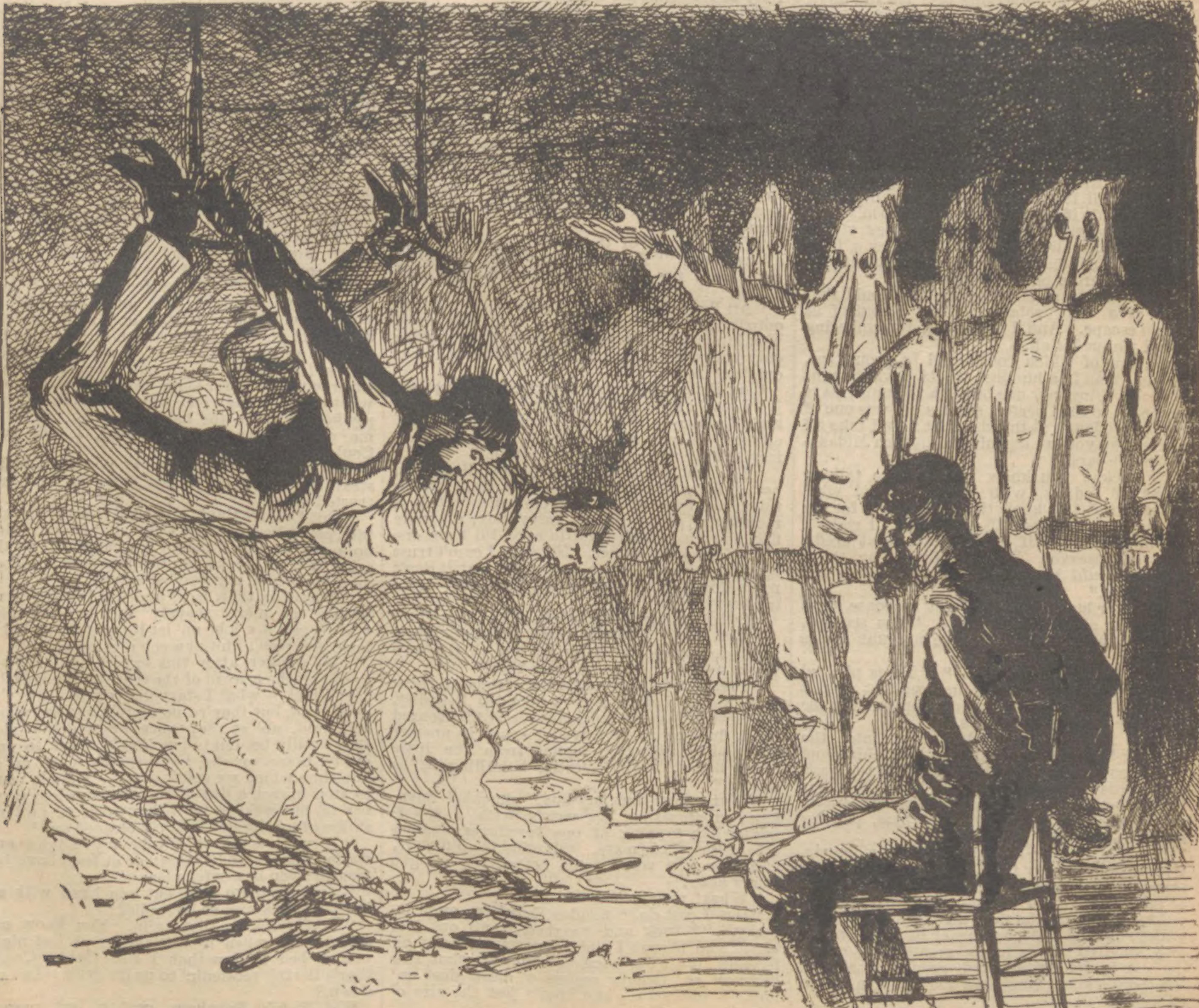
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No. 257

DEATH-TRAP DIGGINGS: or, A HARD MAN FROM 'WAY BACK.

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.,

AUTHOR OF "EQUINOX TOM," "SOL SCOTT," "ALABAMA JOE," "JACK RABBIT," "CAPTAIN COOL-BLADE," "PACIFIC PETE," "OLD '49,"
"THREE-FINGERED JACK," "THE LONG-HAIRED PARDS," "JOAQUIN, THE SADDLE KING," ETC., ETC.



"BEHOLD THE DOOM DECREED BY YOUR INNOCENT VICTIMS, FOUL ASSASSINS!" RUMBLED THE SPECTER CHIEF.

Death-Trap Diggings;

OR,

A Hard Man from 'Way Back.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,
AUTHOR OF "ELEPHANT TOM," "SPITFIRE
SAUL," "OLD '49," "JOAQUIN, THE
SADDLE KING," ETC., ETC.

PART I.

CHAPTER I.

THE VALLEY OF GOLD.

RALPH BURNHAM straightened his broad, sinewy back, casting an upward glance at the "poor man's clock" in the cloudless heavens, then brushed the thick drops of sweat from his heated brow with an arm that was only a trifle less muddy than his hairy, sunburnt hands, as he cast a leisurely glance around him before uttering the signal which rose to his lips.

A half-dozen sturdy fellows strung out in a line, with just room enough between them to admit of the free swinging of pick or plying of long-handled shovel, sparing no time for jest or conversation, though the rays of the sun are growing hot and hotter, as the last remnant of shade clings closer to the rough rock walls which environ the little valley. Working like galley-slaves under the eye of a cruel taskmaster, one would think at first glance; a second would decide them willing slaves. No sparing of muscle, no playing "old soldier." Every blow dealt with a will, not idly nor carelessly, but with an eye to counting in the sum total of that day's work.

Their surroundings, their manner of working, the tools they used, all proclaimed their calling, and their manner as plainly declared that they were not seeking in vain.

"Noon, mates!" cried Ralph Burnham, cheerily. "Twelve o'clock—or nigh enough to it for a blazing hot day like this. Knock off work, take a bit o' scrubbing up, for unless my nose lies, the women-folk have nigh about got grub ready."

"That's the best word I've heard since the call to breakfast," laughed a lithe, trim-built young fellow, giving his rude "long-tom" a parting shake before leaving it. "It's fun alive, no doubt, this washing out golden plums, especially when the precious fruit is as plentiful as we have found it here, but all the same, I've struck easier work in my brief career."

"You know our reasons for working so hard, and sticking so close at it," gravely remarked Burnham.

"Oh, I'm not growling," with a light laugh.

"Come with me then. I'm going up to the dam before dinner. Of course all is safe in that quarter or little Davy would have given some sign; but all the same, I can't help but think what we'd do if anything should happen."

"Do?" laughed the other, as they strode along side by side. "Leave this valley a heap sight quicker than we won our way into it. Give us a harder one, old friend."

"It would be no laughing matter should that dam give way," soberly. "Not a soul of us would escape. And I can't help remembering that I planned it all."

"A fact of which you should be proud, too. Not one man in a hundred would have thought of such a thing, nor one out of a thousand have carried it to such perfect success. I was one of the first to laugh at the idea, but now I take off my hat to you as a genius, a modern Midas—minus the ears."

"I reckon you know what you're talking about, if I don't, with your ears and your genuses; but I do know this much: only for me we wouldn't be here. If we git out all right I wouldn't be a man if I didn't take what credit the trick deserves. But if it fails—if anything ser'ous should happen—I hev to shoulder the hull blame."

"Not for long," was the light response, with a meaning glance about them. "Ten seconds, I reckon, would about close the account for us all."

"Not for me," doggedly. "If I was planted at the bottom of a grave a hundred feet deep it couldn't hold me if anything happened to the little one through my doin's."

Clay Benedict glanced keenly into the weather-beaten face of the man beside him, and he saw so nothing there that cut short the jesting words which rose to his lips. This was feeling far too powerful for idle speech, and in silence they scaled the difficult pass, pausing upon the edge of a rude dam.

It was a peculiar scene, well worthy a description in full, if only for a more perfect understanding of the tragic events which were fated to follow each other in such rapid succession.

At the feet of the two men, lay a basin-like valley, oblong and curvilinear in shape, about two hundred yards in its greatest diameter, deepest in its center, and gradually sloping toward the sides, much like the bed of a miniature lake.

On the east and west, rock walls rose abrupt-

ly, rough and broken, yet presenting difficulties such as few men could surmount, save in two places, where winding trails led to the summit. At the lower end, or that furthest from where the two men now stood, the rocky barrier was cut away in a narrow pass to a level with the gravelly bed within.

Through this could be obtained a glimpse of a level plain beyond, across which ran the broad, shallow bed of what had recently been a considerable stream of water.

Directly beneath the two miners, the rocks were wet and covered with a slimy moss, the earth having been eaten away from between them as though by falling water, but their gaze did not linger here, as the sound of a light footstep caused them to turn around, just as a slender, frail-looking lad just entering his 'teens, came up.

"All's well so far, Davy?" asked Ralph Burnham, his voice softening as he tapped the lad kindly beneath the chin.

"Look at them!" proudly cried the youngster, dragging a heavy string of noble trout from the pond, and holding them up for inspection. "They bit like fun, until a little while ago, but a big rascal bu'sted my line, an' I knowed you wouldn't like me to come down afore you called."

"Good lad—but you mustn't fergit what you was set to do, fish or no fish, Davy. We pend on you, while we work, and jest a little keerlessness, or a minnit's forgetfulness, mought wipe us all off o' the face o' the airth. You went your rounds reg'lar, Davy?" asked Burnham.

"Didn't you tell me to be sure?" simply, as though that fact was all-sufficient answer.

The father nodded approvingly, as his keen gray eyes roved over the scene.

A long, wedge-shaped pond of water, tiny waves lipping against the dam, almost level with its top. The dam a rude but strong structure, composed of rocks, tree-trunks, brush and soil, tightly packed and beaten together.

Fifty yards from where the trio stood, the pent-up water rushed roaring through a narrow channel or sluiceway, cut at a sharp angle to the dam, thus allowing all surplus water to escape, and greatly lessening the strain upon the dam.

Ralph Burnham led the way to this point, pausing close upon its edge, looking thoughtfully at the hurrying element.

This channel was plainly the work of human hands, for the tops of more than one rock showed the black marks of blasting powder. It had been cut and dug for several rods, until lower ground was gained, where there was fall sufficient to carry off the water without artificial aid.

"We was in too big a hurry fer our own safety," said Burnham, tapping a huge boulder which rested close to the cut. "We should hev blasted this dornick out o' the way. Ef it was to be eat away onderneath, and fall down thar, it would turn back enough water to blow that dam to etarnity!"

"Little danger of that," said Benedict, with a lazy gape. "You're turning your hair gray with fears for what will never happen, old friend."

"All I've left to me on this airth is 'pending onto it," gravely. "Berthy and little Davy, here. You kin laugh and take it easy, sence you've only yourself to think for. So could I, ef it was only my own life."

Clay Benedict laughed shortly, as he replied:

"I would fight as hard as you, even, to avert such disaster—and I don't overvalue my life, either. There's something down yonder that is worth far more, in my estimation."

"The dust, I reckon," simply added Burnham, not noticing the bright, yet soft, light which filled the eyes of his companion. "It is a monstrous pritty pile—Davy, boy, git your fish, and while you're waitin here, I'll have one cooked for your dinner. Not that I cain't trust him, boy as he is, like a gray-head, but it don't make things any better to talk them over afore too many ears."

"Still harping on the safety of the dam?"

"Not now. I meant 'bout the dust. How much do you reckon we've got out in the two weeks we've bin at work down thar?"

"Pretty tidy day-wages—a couple of thousand apiece, I dare say," responded Benedict, the light in his eyes quickening, and his bronzed cheek flushing as he waved his hat in answer to a white fluttering signal from the little camp below. "Miss Bertha is calling us to dinner."

"Worse than that, my boy," chuckled Burnham, emphasizing his words with a wood-pecker-like tapping of one forefinger against the chest of his mate. "Double them figgers, and then you won't tetch bottom, by a right smart heap!"

"What! you don't mean—"

"But I jest do!" nodded Burnham, emphatically. "I tuck and weighed it all out last night, and though I ain't so powerful hefty on figgerin', it ain't so hard to count up what five hundred an' twenty ounces o' clean dust an' nuggets 'mounts to; and that's jest the size o' our pile so fur!"

In genuine surprise, Clay Benedict made a rapid calculation in his mind, taking the average value of an ounce of gold-dust as a factor, then muttering:

"One hundred thousand dollars! Impossible!"

"Heap big words, ain't they?" laughed the veteran, grimly. "Kinder stretch a feller's throat to spit 'em out? But all the same it's gospel truth I'm givin' ye, lad, though you don't need to crack it up to the boys jest yit."

"You mean to keep it secret from them?"

"Fer jest now, sartin," was the quick response. "They're a good average lot, take 'em as men run, but I reckon they've got thar failin's, like all the rest o' mankind. They hain't no idee the pile's so big—"

"I can hardly believe it myself!" interjected Benedict. "I knew we were making enormous wages, but I never dreamed that the sum total was one half what you state."

The veteran chuckled softly.

"Mebbe I did tell a white lie or two to the boys, but it don't rest very heavy onto my conscience. You know I do all the weighin' each night afore stowin' away the clean-up, an' whar the lads trust a feller like they do me, it wasn't very hard to dust thar eyes a bit."

He paused abruptly, gazing intently into the eyes of Clay Benedict, his bronzed cheek flushing hotly at what he read there. Or was it all fancy?

"You started to say somethin', young man. Spit it out!" he muttered, his voice sounding gruff and stern.

"I was not aware of the fact," with a half laugh; "but since you press me, I admit thinking how fortunate it was for the lads down yonder that you are an honest man."

A sinewy hand closed upon his shoulder, and wheeled him about so that they stood fairly face to face. The blue eyes glowed hotly as the veteran spoke again:

"Thar's more'n one meanin' to them words o' yours, boy, unless I'm greatly mistook. S'posin' I wasn't a honest man?"

"In that case, you could make a mighty good thing of it," was the quick response, as black eyes met blue. "I don't believe the boys know that they're entitled to one-half the amount you mention. You could pocket fifty thousand dollars, and not one of them would be a mite the wiser, while—"

"Bite it off, right thar!" grated Burnham, his voice trembling with anger, his grip tightening until Benedict flinched from actual pain. "I hope I don't misunderstand ye, lad. Ef I thought fer a minnit you was in airtiest, much as I've liked ye, I'd ram them words down your throat with my fist, an' toss ye into the race, fer the water to kerry you to the devil that putt the insult onto your tongue."

"And serve me rightly, too," hastily uttered the other, wresting himself free, then extending his hand, with a laugh. "My dear sir, how could you so utterly mistake me?"

"You didn't mean it, then?" doubtfully.

"To even hint that you could defraud the men? Most decidedly no!" with emphasis.

"It sounded mighty that way."

"The thought was perfectly natural, and would have occurred, had an angel stood in your place. You admitted holding double the amount of gold with which you are credited by the men down yonder. From my own expectations, I know that they would be perfectly satisfied with the lesser sum. The idea struck me, what a good thing you could make of it, by simply holding on to the half, and when you asked me what I was thinking about, I told you. Could I do less?"

"It was a insult to me, ef you thought I'd steal the value of one dollar from the lads that trusted me—"

"But I didn't think any such thing," quickly interposed Benedict. "Come, old friend; think no more of it. I meant no harm, but all the same, if it will make you feel any easier, I'll beg your pardon on my bended knees."

"I don't ax that, lad," and the brawny hand wrung the more shapely member warmly. "We'll call it a joke an' let it go at that; but I hope you won't hint at sech a thing ag'in."

"No danger, after this experience. I'll not even breathe a word of the truth to the lads."

"Which is what I started to ax ye. They're good boys, but they're no more'n human, when all's said, an' ef they once knowed how rich they actilly be, ten to one they'd want to pull out fer home, or else hev a spree over it, an' so lose time which we cain't afford. I don't want to stop in sech a death-trap one hour longer'n I hev to, but we'd be wuss than fools to pull up stakes afore the bed is fairly cleaned out."

"If you would only take my advice and station the camp outside; or at least have the women sleep in a safer place—"

Ralph Burnham flung out one hand with an impatient gesture, as he replied:

"Don't fetch up that ag'in. You know my reasons, an' when it was talked of last night you all hed to 'low that I was right. Come; thar's Bertha motionin' to us fer grub. Le's git down."

Yet Ralph Burnham cast a last uneasy

glance around him as he passed over the rude dam. Though making money far more rapidly than his most sanguine hopes had ever dared to picture, each hour passed in that situation was one of positive torture to him.

A full month previous to the date on which they are introduced to the reader, this little company, comprising ten men, two women and one boy, occupying four wagons with their little all, reached this spot on their way to California, where they intended to settle for good and all.

It was shortly before the continent was spanned by the railway, and for reasons of economy, they preferred making the journey overland.

With one exception, they were old friends and close neighbors, and with the exception of the Burnham family and Clay Benedict, were all related to each other, though one of their number, a young man called Vernon Curtis, had spent the past few years of his life apart from the rest, in the land to which they were hastening when they came upon the valley of gold.

The season had been an extraordinarily dry one, and to find water, the little train left the most direct route, taking this cut-off, which Ralph Burnham had followed years before, when he joined in the first mad rush to California, in the spring immediately following the first discovery of gold.

More than the mere desire to find an abundance of water led him to this course. He remembered the present spot, though in his ignorance, at the time, he had not dreamed of the wondrous treasure which he, with his mates, was then passing by. Ten years' experience in wresting gold from its resting-place had made him wiser, and though he kept his secret hopes close locked in his bosom, until he had made sure he was not deceived, he lost little time in confirming them. He found that the edges of the little river were plentifully stocked with precious metal, and soon fixed his thoughts upon the oval valley, then full to the rock walls with water.

His mates were incredulous when he made known his idea, but their laughter was soon changed to eager wonder, after a day spent in diving to the bottom of the lake, scraping up the richly freighted gravel into bags, to drag ashore and wash out. Rude though the process the result was marvelous, and when Ralph Burnham fully divulged his scheme, he was seconded y all.

The dam was built part way, then the side chute cut through, to let off the water while the barrier was completed. This was made as substantial as time and materials would permit, and then the water which filled the lake bed, was drained off and bailed out until only sufficient was left to work the gold-bearing soil, with what escaped from the dam.

Sanguine though the veteran digger had been, his wildest hopes were discounted by the actual result. The lake bed was one pocket of gold, from the finest flakes to nuggets as large as eggs, of gold extremely pure. With such an incentive, the men worked almost desperately, though Burnham held them under strict rule.

Eager to get rich, for the sake of his two children, whom he fairly idolized, it may still be questioned whether Ralph Burnham was not paying too great a price for the wealth he was accumulating so rapidly.

Fearing lest their wondrous strike should be suspected by other wanderers from the direct trail, as soon as the little valley was sufficiently drained, the wagons were hauled inside and the tents pitched close under one of the rock walls, though all knew that in case the dam should give way before the pressure of the water, almost certain destruction to all must follow.

It was this haunting fear that rendered the life of the gold-digger almost unbearable, and led to his concealing the full amount of gold collected. He believed the men would be better satisfied to toil on without ceasing save for eating and sleep, when worn with work, if they deemed themselves less rich than they actually were.

Two weeks more would suffice to exhaust the diggings, if they made as rapid progress as heretofore, and with dogged nerve he fought against the haunting dread, resolved to stick it out until the task was completed.

In silence he led the way down the steep to the lake-bed, bearing with him the string of fish little Davy had caught while keeping guard over the dam.

Equally silent Clay Benedict followed his lead, the light in his black eyes deepening and strengthening as he watched the young woman who had signaled them to dinner.

He might have had a far less pleasant object to view, for, though not what the classical devotee would have termed beautiful, Bertha Burnham was indeed fair to gaze upon.

True her dress was of calico, and plainly made. Her foot-gear was stout, rather than delicate—made for use, not ornament—while the only jewels she wore were those of health and happiness. But her hair was soft and luxuriant, her complexion clear and rosy, her form lithe, rounded and symmetrical, her lips red and moist, her teeth white and even, her voice

music itself, as she greeted her loved parent and nodded archly toward Clay Benedict, who bowed low before her.

"If the meat is cold, don't blame me," she said with a little pout, as she placed the platter before them. "I called and motioned, but you would not come. It would serve you right to make you fast for your obstinacy."

"One look into your bright eyes is nutriment enough for a starving man, Miss Bertha," said Benedict laughing, but with an undercurrent of meaning in his tones that caused the fair face to flush as its owner turned away.

CHAPTER II.

AN UNWELCOME VISITOR.

DINNER was quickly disposed of, and then, lying under the tilted wagons, or at the entrance to the tents, the gold-diggers indulged themselves in a scant pipe of tobacco before returning to work. Where payment for labor was so rich, the most indolent among the little band cared to waste no more.

Without break or cessation the click of pick and grating of shovel, the rattling of long-tom and cradle, hastily manufactured on the spot, the splashing of mud and gravel in the water—all the sounds of wet placer diggings, echoed back from the rock walls. Hotter grew the rays of the sun, and the faint breeze wholly died away. The flannel shirts grew darker with sweat, great drops of which trickled in swift succession over bronzed and bearded faces—but still the gold-slaves toiled on, as though their very existence depended upon the amount of work they could accomplish before the light of the sun should leave them.

The afternoon was a little more than half spent when a sharp, shrill whistle echoed through the air, coming from the direction of the dam, and Ralph Burnham dropped his pick with a hot, explosive curse as he turned in that direction.

"Trouble, boys!" he grated, his blue eyes filling with a dangerous light. "Ready for work at the word—Ha!"

His first thought as that warning sound came to his ears was of the dam, and for an instant his blood fairly ran cold in his veins as he believed that his haunting fear was at last to come true. But the moment he caught sight of the crouching figure of little Davy at one end of the dam, he uttered that gasping breath of relief. Whatever the peril, it was not taking that horrible shape.

Little Davy swung his hat, to make sure that he was seen, then motioned toward the crest of the eastern rock wall.

Instinctively every eye was turned in that direction, and angry mutterings broke from the lips of the gold diggers as they noted the figure of a man standing upon the rocks, coolly staring down upon them.

"Tain't Dan Keeble?" ventured one, naming the man whose turn it was to act as hunter for the day.

"No sech good luck!" growled Burnham, his grip tightening upon the butt of the heavy revolver hanging against his hip. "It's some infernal spy—good-by to our secret, lads! Ten to one the dirty whelp has got a thousan' cronies out yender, waitin' for him to come back an' port his diskivery!"

"It rests with you to say whether or no he ever tells mortal what he has found out," said a low voice in the ear of the veteran, and turning abruptly, Burnham met the cold, yet glittering gaze of Clay Benedict. "Say the word, and I'll drop him in his tracks, too cold to skin!"

Not a trace of emotion in the tones, yet Burnham felt that the young fellow meant all he said, and that he would be equal to the bloody deed once permission was given, and there was something close akin to horror in the impulse which led him to clutch the arm of the speaker.

"Not that—it'd be murder, man!" he exclaimed hoarsely.

"Murder?" echoed Benedict with curling lip and uplifted brows. "Is'n't the fellow spying upon us? You said yourself that he's only waiting to make sure what we're at before hastening to inform his mates."

"Which I think so yet; but that don't give us no right to shoot down a feller-critter without warnin'."

"All right, you're boss; have it your own way."

Benedict relinquished his grasp upon the weapon, and folding his arms, quietly awaited the result.

Swiftly the few words were interchanged, and in a tone so low that none of the other miners appeared to catch their meaning, for with one accord they began handling their weapons menacingly, already looking upon the stranger as one who thought to rob them of their wealth.

"Hold, ye foolish critters!" sternly cried Ralph Burnham, his blue eyes flashing. "Would ye let him git off to spread the news? He's too fur away for them popguns to—"

"Not for mine," coldly interrupted Benedict. "I can put a hole through any part of his carcas you may mention."

"I tell ye I won't have no murder ef we don't strike another blow with pick in this claim!"

"Hellow you!" cried the stranger in a stentorian voice, swinging his broad-brimmed felt hat to attract the notice of the valley occupants.

"Hevin' heaps o' fun down thar, hain't ye, all to your lonesome selves! Room fer one more, I reckon?"

"For the right sort, mebbe thar is—but that ain't sayin' you'd fit into the socket," called out Burnham, adding in a guarded tone to his mates: "If he comes down, leave him fer me to deal with."

"Squar' hole or round, it don't make a diff o' bitter to yer uncle Fuller. I kin fit into ary one, an' never leak a drap, ef I takes the notion," laughed the stranger, replacing his hat, and descending the rocks with the activity and sure-footedness of a mountain goat.

"He's in the trap; if he gets out with his news, don't blame me," muttered Benedict, turning and walking over to where Bertha stood, drawn from the tent by the outcry.

"Snug little hole you fellers got in yer," observed the unwelcome visitor, as he reached the basin, and nodded bluntly to Burnham, whom he readily divined to be the chief of the party. "Never dreamed o' makin' sech a diskivery, when I sat in to climb up them dornicks. Saw the drink hed cut a new way out, an' thought I'd take a look how it was done."

"Well, I reckon you've found out," grunted Burnham.

"Kinder," with a grin. "Kin sorter guess what it was did fer, too. Struck it powerful rich, ain't ye?"

"It might be worse."

"An' couldn't be much better, less ye struck a reg'lar bank or xpress-office, or I never flipped a washer!" ejaculated the fellow, stooping over a heap of dirt, and running it through his fingers.

"Then you're an old hand at the business?"

"Stranger, can't ye see it stick out o' the two eyes o' me?" and flopping back the brim of his hat, he squared himself before Burnham, his feet widely separated, his thumbs under his armpits. "Take a good, squar' look at my phizymahog, sc you'll know me the next time we run chuck up ag'inst each other."

"I've seen handsomer lookin' thugs at a monkey show."

"But never into a lookin'-glass, unless somebody pasted a pictur' onto the back o' it afore-hand," grinned the other.

"Feel sorter funny this evenin', don't ye?"

"Fun? Now ye hit me right whar I live when I'm to burn, stranger! I'm chuck fuller o' fun than a beathan Chine is o' nat'ral cussedness! Stick a pin-hole into me anywhars, an' you'd see the fun run out in a stream bigger'n a June fresh! Milder'n whisky, an' sweeter'n buttermilk, ef you take me when the sign o' the moon's right; but tap me when it's in the wrong quarter, an' it's t'rantler juice an' essence o' snattlerake, stirred up in a tubful o' ackyfortis, an' seasoned with assnick an' stricknynel. It's me that's belchin' now, an' when you ketch yours truly lyin', you want to hyste your am-brill, fer the stars is goin' to fall, sure!"

Thrusting his shaggy head forward, the stranger puffed out his cheeks until his nose gradually dwindled and almost disappeared from view. A moment thus, then he suffered the accumulated wind to escape in a shrill, long-drawn whistle that caused Ralph Burnham to start back and cast a swift glance along the rock walls, half-believing it a signal which imported mischief to him and his.

A short, mocking laugh broke from the lips of the queer character as he noticed this start, and with a patronizing wave of one hand, he added:

"Don't you git skeered an' run away, stranger, fer the sign's jest right, now, an' I wouldn't hurt a ha'r o' your ole pow fer no money. It's only my way, an' don't mean nothin'."

Ralph Burnham turned upon him with a frown.

"I've heard sheep blaatin' afore this—"

"Hol' on, you!" and a stumpy forefinger was shaken close before his face. "I don't go back onto mutton, but I draws a line at the wool. I'm a straight-ha'red critter, I bet. A sleep ole tom-cat when you rub the fur the right way, but scratch me ag'inst the grain, an' I'm a porcupine with a dozen bairds on the p'nt o' each an' every quill. Give me a double stir, an' then I come out in my Sunday duds—A Hard Man from 'Way Back, a thousan' miles the other side o' civilized creation! I spit blue, green an' yaller, an' wherever it draps, horn toads an' snattlerakes sprout up like weeds in a tater-patch! Git me real, double-proof mad, an' I split my hide up the back an' come out a mount'in that kivers seven counties, not countin' the foot-hills! An' I begin to feel a little mite crawly already—not that I want to skeer you, stranger!"

"Skeer your grandmother's hind foot!" contemptuously interjected the veteran. "Look here, you. Don't go to puttin' on too many frills, or you'll mebbe git the starch took out of 'em in a way that won't make you sleep any easier this night. I've listened to gas-bags blow off afore now, an' when they got good a-goin', I've mopped the floor with 'em, an' never tuck a extra breath while it lasted, nuther."

The stranger gazed at him from head to foot.

Death-Trap Diggings.

closely, critically, then nodded, with a good-natured smile.

"I reckon you mean it, too, from the looks. A tough sprout afore the frost tetch'd ye, an' some good timmer left yit in the ole trunk, I'll warrant. But I didn't come here to talk fight—"

"What did you come for, then?" demanded Burnham.

"To ax ef ye didn't want to hire a han'? I kin wrastle pick or shovel with the best in the outfit, an' when you sets me to 'tendin' the cradle I'm jest more'n to bum—as why shouldn't I be? The oldest in the fambly, an' nineteen young'-uns trompin' onto each other's heels. An' not one in the caboodle that knowed enough to rock the cradle but me!"

"Our party is complete without you," bluntly said the veteran. "I wouldn't give you working-room if your hands was as nimble as your tongue."

"All right, my covey; I ain't goin' to crowd ye. Reckon I kin make livin' wages on my own hook, an' wrastle fer chuck enough to keep goin', to boot. Got ary ole mud-grubber you want to 'spose off?"

"What ye reckon you're goin' to do?"

"Go to work an' make a good hafe day out o' a quarter."

"Work? Where, and at what?"

"Pickin' yaller plums out o' this big dumpin'."

"On our claim!"

"Whar's your stakes, an' whar's your notices? When did ye git 'em recorded?" demanded the stranger.

Ralph Burnham tapped him on the shoulder, then pointed to the rock-walls which inclosed the little valley.

"You kin see the line-marks afore your face. Here's jest nine two-legged corner-posts, with more to back 'em, ef needed. As fer the papers, we jest rammed them into our tools fer safe keepin', an' when any one wants to read 'em we'll furnish the light fer him to see the letters and figgers by—you understand?" and he tapped the butt of a revolver.

"You ain't durned hogs enough fer to want to keep the hull pot to yourselves?" indignantly exclaimed the stranger.

"It's a pot that we cleaned out an' set to boilin' our own selves, stranger, an' it'd be a monstrous impudent critter that would deny our right to sup our own brewin'."

The Hard Man from 'Way Back gave a sniff of utter disgust as he turned away from Ralph Burnham and took a hasty scrutiny of the faces around him. Dark and lowering, not a friendly eye among the entire lot.

"I take it all back, fer ef this ain't Brustle-ville, then I never smelt a pork corral in my life. Don't reckon I'm hankerin' a'fer any o' your soup, ole geut; an' as fer takin' up my bed an' board with ye, it makes me begin to feel hoppy an' crawlly an' want to scratch, jest to think o' the idee. So-long, critters! Be good to yourselves, an' do your own gruntin' fer lack of a straight-haired white man to do it for ye—I'm off to hunt up a sniff o' fresh air."

With a short, reckless laugh, he turned on his heel and started across the little valley, as though intending to take his departure by way of the pass at the lower end, but the heavy hand of the veteran gold-digger fell upon his shoulder and checked his progress.

"Wait a bit, stranger," said Burnham, as the man wheeled to confront him with a quick flashing in his eyes. "You've bin doin' the heft o' the talkin', an' now I want to chip in fer a wee bit. Whar's your mates?"

"Never had none. When the arkycheck tuck a squar' look at me, he jest turned 'round an' broke the molds, fer he knowed the univarse wasn't big enough fer to hold two of a kind."

"Showed stud-hoss sense, too!" dryly commented Burnham. "But who did you come here with? Who are your partners?"

"Ef I hedn't bin brung up politely, I'd say it was none o' your durn business. Sense I was, why I don't mind tellin' ye that I hain't got no pardners; that I'm playin' a lone han' all by my lonesome self; that I come here 'ca'se I didn't go some's else; an' that I'm goin' away ag'in beca'se I don't stop here no longer. Fer furder information apply next do!"

"So much the better. Ef you hain't got no fri'nds they won't be oneasy 'bout your stoppin' out late."

"What ye mean by that?" sharply demanded the stranger.

"Sorry to do anythin' that looks like crowdin', but that yarn o' yours sounds mighty fishy, an' we've got too much at stake to run any unnecessary risks. Reckon you'll hev to call yourself our prisoner."

"Who says so?" sharply demanded the stranger.

"I do," was the cool response of the veteran.

"You can't prove it!"

Sharp and clear-cut came the words, full of defiance as though the reckless fellow valued naught the heavy odds arrayed against him, and his glittering eyes roved swiftly over the scowling faces of the gold-diggers.

Burnham raised a low anger, emphasizing each word as it fell from his lips.

"Look ye, my good fellow; business is business. You come in here without an invite, an' whar your good sense mought 'a' told ye you wouldn't be welcome. You tried to bluff us on a bottail flush. You're old enough to know that all bets lay in a game o' this sort, an' you can't pull down when you're called, without ye got the longest pole—"

"Ef it was only hafe as long's your clapper, I'd rake the 'simmons, sure," bluntly interrupted the other. "Spit out what ye got to say, an' don't chew on it all day."

"Short an' sweet, ef you like it best that way. You're our prisoner fer a few days. In two weeks, or tharabout, you kin travel jest as quick an' fur as ye like; but on tel then, you don't stir out o' this pocket on your own legs."

"Who's to hinder me, ef I take a notion?"

Ralph Burnham waved his hand toward his mates.

"Nine men—two wimmen—a boy an' a bulldog—not countin' in the mules," coolly uttered the stranger, his keen eyes taking in all at a sweeping glance. "Plenty to bluff a greenhorn on, stranger, but a monstrous weak hand to play ag'in a straight-haired man with sand in his craw. Go borry a rijiment or two o' men, afore ye sling talk o' that caliber into the grinders of a tough citizen from 'Way Back!"

"Empty words won't buy good whisky, stranger, an' that's no use in wastin' more breath about it," impatiently cried the veteran. "I don't want to hurt you, an' I promise to turn you loose at the end of two weeks from now."

"You're too durned kind!" grinned the Hard Man from 'Way Back. "I wouldn't putt you to that much trouble fer the world an' all its 'lations!"

"Come; talk enough. Will you hand over your tools, or must we take 'em? One or the other, an' that in a hurry!"

"All right—business it is, then," promptly retorted the tough citizen, but without any further sign of obeying the stern commands of the gold-digger. "I come here, a white man, 'spectin' fer to meet white men. I made you a fa'r offer to jine in an' work on sheers or fer wages, but you wouldn't hev neither the one nor the t'other. I didn't kick at that, fer in this kentry a man is a right to pick his own comp'ny ef he wants to. You hinted that my room was better than my partnership. I ain't a hog, even ef I do happen to run my nose in among 'em once in a while. I said I'd travel—"

"And I said you shouldn't!" cried Burnham, hotly.

"Then one of us lied, an' it ain't me!" cried the Hard Man from 'Way Back, and as the words escaped his lips he leaped swiftly backward, bringing the gold-diggers all in front of him, whipping forth a brace of revolvers, cocking and bringing them to a level with a rapidity that was marvelous.

"Hold hard, you!" he grated, his eyes glittering like coals of fire in the dark, as the astonished diggers mechanically felt for their weapons. "I'll slap it to the fust man as pulls a barker, an' I never wasted a blue pill in my life."

"Go slow, lads!" cried Burnham. "He can't get away, and I won't have any bloodshed. I'll bounce the first man to fire. And you, fool! down with your weapons!"

He turned sharply upon the stranger, but that worthy only laughed mockingly as he held his pistols at a level.

"Don't you wish I would, ole coon? Heap o' fun, ain't it? Reckoned you had a mighty soft snap, didn't ye? But that's the time you got fooled bad. Budd Painter's my name, an' I'm a full-blown painter by natur'. Never was saddled an' bridled, much less rid by mortal man. I'm a Bad Man from 'Way Back o' all civilization, an' kin lick the hull outfit, one down 'nother come on—or durned ef I ain't man enough to scramble ye all up in a heap! Ef ye don't believe it, jump in."

The beau ideal of a reckless desperado, Budd Painter confronted the gold-diggers, his fingers on trigger, ready to pour out a leaden hailstorm of death if crowded. One man against nine, but the odds did not appear so overwhelming after all.

Then—a pistol exploded and the defiant head jerked abruptly back, his hands flew up, his fingers contracting spasmodically on the triggers as he fell in a quivering heap, his bullets wasting themselves on the rock wall beyond.

CHAPTER III.

MUSIC IN THE AIR.

TAKEN completely by surprise, for a brief space, Ralph Burnham stood like one petrified, staring at the quivering form of Budd Painter. Indeed, his first fancy was that the Hard Man from 'Way Back was attempting another of his smart moves in the bold game he was playing; but this suspicion died away almost ere it found birth, for he saw the red blood running down over the cheek of the fallen man.

The hot blood flashed back into his own cheek, and an ugly light came into his eyes as he turned to the left where stood the tents, and from which direction he now knew that first shot had come.

Before the shrinking figure of Bertha Burn-

ham, stood the tall, handsome shape of Clay Benedict, just in the act of replacing a revolver in his belt.

Hot with anger, and in hoarse tones, the veteran cried:

"You did it, young feller, after all my warnin's?"

"I fancied it time to break the deadlock—yes."

"I said he shouldn't be hurt—that I wouldn't hev no bloody doin's while I hed life an' stren' th enough to kick ag'in it. I swore I'd mount the man as did him hurt, an' by the Lord! I'll keep my word ef you was ten times my mate!"

Ralph Burnham, his eyes flashing with hot indignation, strode toward the tent, his huge fists doubled tightly, clearly bent on mischief, but Clay Benedict gave no signs of meeting the attack in similar spirit. Instead, an amused smile curled his mustached lips as he folded his arms and stood his ground before the enraged gold-digger.

"Father!" and Bertha Burnham glided between the two men, her plump, shapely arms outspread as a barrier. "You will not—you must not! It was my fault. I feared that madman would kill you, and I begged Clay to interfere. Dear father—"

The arms were twined about his neck, and further speech was stopped by a little storm of kisses from the rosy lips.

The sourdest and most confirmed misanthrope could not long have resisted such sweet argument, and the hot, unreasoning rage of the veteran cooled off with amazing rapidity.

"Well, if you done it, honey-bird—but all the same, I'd jest as lieve an' a little ruther it'd bin me that ketched the dose; fer my word was passed, an'—it's a durned shame, anyhow!" with a sudden outburst.

His smile vanishing and his voice growing grave, Clay Benedict spoke as he stepped forward:

"I ask your pardon for acting against your commands, old friend, but I could hardly do otherwise, as you must acknowledge when you come to view the matter in cool blood."

"Nine men ag'inst one, an' that one knocked over by a side shot when he wasn't lookin'!" muttered Burnham, in a tone of utter disgust.

"Better him than one or two of our mess," quickly interposed Benedict. "He had you covered, and he meant shoot, all over. Why wait until he began burning powder?"

"But you didn't need to butcher him—"

"Nor did I," with a cold laugh, as the speaker turned on his heel. "Since you are so cursed punctilious, you can nurse the rascal back to life, and then set yourself up as a target for him to practice on, until his or your wounded honor is healed."

The old man's lips parted to give a hot answer, but his speech was cut short by an exclamation of astonishment from one of the diggers, who had reached the side of the fallen man, and who started back from his hasty examination of the injury, as the supposed corpse gave unmistakable signs of life by raising to a sitting posture.

One trembling hand mechanically sought his head, while he made no effort to recover the weapons which had dropped from his grasp as he fell before that sudden shot. There was a dull, vacant look in his bloodshot eyes as they roved slowly and uncertainly around him, which told how far he was from fully realizing what had really occurred to him.

Ralph Burnham sprung forward and kicked the pistols further aw'ay, grasping the fellow by the shoulder as he spoke to his mates:

"Pick up those popguns, some o' you—"

"I'm A Hard Man from 'Way Back, an' I kin lick—" feebly muttered the tough citizen, staggering to his feet with the assistance of the veteran, whose left hand took the huge knife from its scabbard and flung it to one of the men.

An unsteady lurch of the injured man caused him to feel this action, and as he caught a glimpse of the steel as it flashed through the bright sunlight, he seemed to divine the situation and recover his powers all at once, for with an oath he twisted away from the grasp on his shoulder, and striking out with a massive fist, sent the stalwart veteran staggering a dozen feet away.

"Han's off, an' no tricks on travelers, ef you please!" he cried, swiftly brushing the blood from over his eyes and glaring savagely around him, as his hands fumbled at his belt. "I'm A Hard Man from 'Way Back—Painter by name, an' painter by natur'! I kin eat a swath through a rijiment—"

A volley of furious curses streamed from his lips as his fingers failed to close upon the weapons he sought, then the gold-diggers piled upon him.

Desperately he struggled against the overwhelming odds, and more than one sturdy fellow went headlong to the ground before his ponderous strokes, marked for more than one day, weaponless though his hands were, and it was not for several minutes that he succumbed, bound hand and foot.

An amused smile playing around his lips, Clay Benedict watched the affair without taking further part in it; but when the victory was finally achieved, and the panting miners arose and left the tough citizen lying on the ground, he said:

"An ugly animal to handle, old friend, even with empty hands. What would have happened had I not murdered the poor devil?—I believe those were the terms you used?"

With a sheepish grin the veteran tenderly lingered his nose, upon which the full force of that stunning blow had fallen, and his tones were somewhat crestfallen as he replied:

"The fool was in my boots, I reckon. But who'd a' thunk a pesky blow-hard like him hed so much git-up-an' git? I tuck him fer a gas-bag, but I'm blamed ef he didn't turn out a hull factory o' gun-cotton! My head feels as though a mule hed kicked me west-eend-an'-crooked!"

The moment his assailants rose and left him, Budd Painter savagely tested the strength of his bonds; but quickly realizing that escape after that fashion was impracticable, his mad rage appeared to as suddenly die away, and his voice was low and even as he called out to Ralph Burnham:

"Say you, old man, ef you ain't too monstrous busy, mebbe you wouldn't mind lendin' me your ear-holes a bit?"

"Sartin," was the prompt response, as the veteran stepped over to where he lay. "Anythin' I kin do for ye—"

"Reckon you've *done* fer me, pritty chuck up, as it is," with a short, hard laugh that bore slight trace of mirth in its echoes. "Trussed up like a pi'zen 'sassinator on the death-trap, an' a hull hive o' bumble-bees swarmin' in my *cabeza!* Done fer? Waal, I should *re-mark!*!"

"That's your own fault, not ours," sharply replied the veteran. "You *would* have it, an'—"

"Oh, I ain't kickin' so much about *whar* I is, as how I come ye so. Both dogs cain't whip, when a couple come together, an' it shows a poor cross when the one licked howls over his misfortune. You'd never hear a whimper from me, ef I'd bin downed in clean, straight-haired fashion; but to turn loose a mule-battery onto a pore cuss when he wasn't lookin', an' then hev a hull rijiment pile onto him, when he was knocked blind—now I ax ye, is that the pure, 'white article?'"

Burnham was a trifle staggered by this appeal, so thoroughly agreeing with his own sentiments, but under the circumstances he did not care to admit as much.

"Them as won't listen to ca'm reason generally has to do the other thing, an' putt up with wuss fare. You would stick your nose in whar it wasn't wanted—"

"Didn't I go fer to pull it out ag'in—say?"

"To run an' tell your mates of the diskivery you'd tumbled onto—which was jest what we couldn't 'low."

"But I tol ye I hedn't got no mates—that I never hed none, but was jest travelin' the kentry on my shape—"

Ralph Burnham impatiently raised his hand and cut short the voluble speech.

"You did say that, an' once tellin' is good as a thousan' fer all it comes to. You was lyin' then, an' you hain't got over it yit. White men don't run loose in these parts without they got plenty o' good backin'. You come on foot. You don't kerry no grub, nur no gun. You was fresh as new milk when you fust stepped down here. We ain't quite idjits, ef we do look like it, an' kin putt one, two, three together as well as though we'd taught school ever sence we was fust weaned."

"You ain't travelin' alone, nur yit on foot-back. You see some sign that sot ye to thinkin', an' you follerid it to this pocket. You made a big diskivery, but it'd bin money into your weasel-skin ef you'd stuck closer to your mates an' never fazed your *cabeza* 'bout what ain't no business o' yours."

"But you *would* do it, an' when a white offer was made to ye, you kicked it into the fire. Ef you got your hoofs scorched a bit in the flare-up, don't lay it up ag'in' us, but set it down to the right a'count: your own bull-cussed-ness!"

"I'll set it down in big enough print, don't you borry no trouble on *that* score, old feller," dryly uttered Painter, with a slow emphatic nod o' his shaggy head and wicked glitter in his eyes. "Some day I'll use you fer a sponge to wipe it out with, too. But let that go fer jest now. I called yer to answer me a easy question: will ye do it?"

"That depends onto its natur'," was the grave reply.

"Who was it that keeled me over?"

"You wouldn't know him, if I was to tell ye his name."

"Durn the name—jest show me *his* face, ef he ain't too big a coward to show up before a straight-haired man!" was the impetuous response, and the tough citizen glared savagely around him, his yellow teeth showing through his shaggy beard.

With a careless step, Clay Benedict parted from Bertha, to whom he had been talking in

quiet, interested tones, and paused before the prisoner, looking down on him with a smile.

"Would you really like to know who wasted good powder and lead on such a worthless rascal as Budd Painter, Esquire? If so, turn those gentle orbs in this direction."

The Hard Man from 'Way Back gazed steadily into the handsome, scornful countenance for several seconds, as though desirous of impressing each and every feature upon his memory beyond the possibility of mistake, before he spoke:

"You don't look so much like a fool, but fer all that, a fool ye *nust* be, or you wouldn't never show up afore me, a'fer what you done!"

"Indeed!" sneered the young man. "May I ask why so?"

"Beca'se I've marked ye—got ye down so fine into my mem'ry-box that I'd know ye ef I see you in Heaven or t'other place, a thousan' year from now, an' we never crossin' each other's track from this to that! Beca'se I swear to get even with you fer that coward shot when I wasn't lookin' at ye, but facin' odds hefty enough, good Lord knows, without a sneakin' cur takin' a side-winder at me from kiver of a woman! Beca'se I'm a man what never fergits good or evil, an' who makes it a sacred p'int o' honor to pay back all debts in the same coin, with double twice over by way o' interest!"

Slowly and deliberately he spoke, each word ringing out clear and distinct and carrying with it the conviction of deadly earnestness. And bold though he undoubtedly was—bold even to recklessness—Clay Benedict felt a little thrill of uneasiness as he met that fixed gaze and listened to that hard, emotionless tone.

But only for a moment. As Budd Painter ceased speaking, the effect of his words vanished with the echoes.

"Barking dogs seldom bite, I've heard say," he said, carelessly, turning on his heel. "If you prove to be an exception, I'll try to make it interesting for you when you present your little account."

The bearded lips parted, but Ralph Burnham stepped between, and checked the prisoner.

"Makin' threats like them ain't goin' to do you no good, my man, nur yit git you out o' this hobble."

"Look here, *you!*" cried Painter, with sudden energy, lifting himself to a sitting posture, despite his bonds, his eyes glittering with a red light, his tones hoarse and strained with the powerful emotions he vainly strove to hold in check:

"You come nigher to bein' a white man than ary other I've see'd sence steppin' into this infarnal trap. I got jest one thing to ax of ye. Set my han's free fer hafe an hour. Let me up an' give me leave to use myself fer that len'th o' time, an' I'll be your nigger as long as you ax fer pay. I'll work fer you night an' day. I won't ax any sheer o' what I dig. I'll live on one meal a day—I'll be satisfied with the bones your dog yender gits through with. I'll let you use my karkidge fer a foot-mop, an' never kick. Only turn me loose long enough to whisper a little love-song into the ear o' that high-toned cuss that jest left me—it's all I ax!"

Swiftly came the words, so hot and venomous that they seemed to blister the lips they crossed, and the prisoner shook and trembled in every fiber, such was his eagerness to gain his point.

Clay Benedict wheeled as he heard the words, and cried:

"Take the fool at his word, Burnham. Turn him loose, since he's spoiling for a lesson. You can't find an easier or surer method of getting rid of him forever."

"I don't ax no weapons—jest my naked han's!" grated Painter, flakes of froth tinged his shaggy beard. "Let him use what he likes; I'll resk the odds! Only turn me loose!"

"Cut the thongs, some of you fellows," quietly uttered Benedict. "Give him the tools, and then stand clear."

"Hold!" cried Burnham, as this order was about to be obeyed. "I'm boss, here, I reckon, an' while I be, it's my say-so that wants to be listened to. Let them ropes alone. An' you, lad," turning sharply upon Benedict, "want to go kinder slow. You broke orders once, an' the next time it won't come off as easy. They ain't goin' to be no fightin' here, 'thout I do it!"

"Just as you say," with a careless shrug of the shoulders. "I only thought to lift you easy over the fence, by rubbing that fellow out after his own liking. Since you won't have it, take your own way with him. I'm done."

"But I ain't!" snarled Painter, savagely, the great veins swelling on his temples. "Sooner or later you an' me must come together, an' the reckonin' won't be any the lighter fer bein' putt off—mind *that*."

Benedict vouchsafed no reply, but picked up his tools and set to work beside one of the rockers.

Painter glared at him for a few moments, then flung himself back with a muttered curse, sullenly refusing to answer the questions with which Burnham pelted him.

Not a word more would he utter, and despairing of extracting the desired information, Burnham had him carried to the scanty shade cast by one of the wagons, and there left.

After a hasty consultation together with his men, the veteran selected two men, and taking their rifles, they left the lake-basin by way of the lower pass.

The remainder of the gold-diggers plied their tools with renewed energy, as though trying to make amends for the time they had lost through the coming of this unwelcome visitor.

Over them all seemed to hang a cloud, and many were the glances they cast up at the rock walls, as though expecting to behold other intruders on their precious domain, now that the golden secret was no longer their sole property.

It was nearly night when Ralph Burnham returned from his scout, but there was light enough to show his anxious mates that he bore no agreeable tidings.

"Thar's a good-sized gang in the neighborhood," he said, moodily. "Whether white or red, I couldn't make out, but it ain't hard to guess which, lookin' at that p'izen critter!"

CHAPTER IV.

A HOT-BLOODED LOVER.

To outward seeming, all was going on as usual within the little valley of gold. At the customary hour, the diggers knocked off work, and washed themselves up for their evening meal, prepared for them by the busy hands of Bertha Burnham and Martha Keeble, wife of the hunter of that day. This duly wrestled with and conquered, they lit their pipes, and drawing a little apart from the women, discussed the situation in low, anxious tones.

Ralph Burnham gave his report more in detail. Several miles away from the valley, he had crossed the trail of a body of horsemen. That the animals had been mounted, he felt satisfied from the nature of the trail; but the soil was such that he could only guess at their number. It was too late for him to follow up his discovery at the time, but he had learned sufficient to strengthen his belief that Budd Painter had allies in the neighborhood, who would be tolerably certain to wonder at his prolonged absence, and sooner or later investigate its meaning.

In hopes of finding the tough citizen in a more pliable humor, Ralph Burnham left his men, and visited the fellow, bearing a little bundle of prepared lint and cloth for bandages.

He had already satisfied himself that Painter was not seriously injured by the bullet sped by Clay Benedict, whose iron nerve and marvelous skill had served to merely "crease" the Hard Man from 'Way Back, sending the leaden missile tearing its way through the scalp just above the temples, drawing blood profusely, and producing a brief insensibility, without causing any permanent ill effects.

The veteran tenderly washed and bandaged the injury, hoping thus to soften the dogged will of his captive; but his was labor spent in vain. Not a word would Budd Painter speak in response to his questions, though he made no resistance to the ministering veteran, nor did a muscle of his hard-set countenance alter during the inquisitorial process, though the gold-digger watched him closely, in hopes of reading there the truth or falsity of the conclusions he had drawn concerning that spoer.

Of all the company, Clay Benedict alone had shown no uneasiness, whatever may have been his inward emotions, blandly refusing to take any part in the consultation which followed the return of the scouts.

"Whatever course you decide upon I'll agree to, and do my best to back up; but don't ask me to suggest anything, for subtle plotting is altogether out of my line," he said, withdrawing from the circle of light cast out by the little camp fire, and lazily stretching himself along the sun-warmed sand.

But for all that, his senses were never more fully upon the alert, and his eyes glittered brightly through the partially closed lids, while his lithe limbs were silently drawn up and his pipe cast aside, as his watchful gaze was at last rewarded as he had so ardently hoped.

Bertha Burnham left the little tent, and slowly moved away toward the upper end of the valley, with the listless steps of one who has no certain destination in view. In fact, such was the case.

The air was close and sultry. The heat of the sun still hovered above the sands and gravel of the golden valley, and unrelieved by the usual night breeze, seemed to parch the throat and fever the blood.

From above came the sullen roaring of the water that dashed and swirled through the chute which had been cut for its accommodation, and the sound itself seemed cooling, soothing, attracting the young woman almost unconsciously.

The dark eyes of Clay Benedict glittered vividly as he saw her move toward the rock barrier, for he readily divined the attraction, and could be have formed her course, he could not have more perfectly suited himself.

With an iron will he held himself in check until Bertha was fairly clear of the camp, then glided softly after her, gaining her side before she divined his presence.

A faint cry escaped her lips as his hand touched her arm, and she shrunk away a trifle before

recognizing who it was, but then she yielded to the gentle force which drew the little, sun-embrowned hand through his arm.

"You are seeking a breath of fresh air, like myself," he said quietly, continuing toward the moisture-dripping rocks at the foot of the dam. "It is hardly endurable here, this evening, but I think there will be a little breeze found up on the top of the dam. Shall we go there?"

"I believe that is what I intended doing, though I am not quite positive," replied Bertha, with a little laugh. "I am so nervous—so disturbed by the coming of that dreadful man—that I cannot rest or sleep. Do you think there is any danger? That it was any of his fellows who made the trail father discovered?"

"No danger can touch you, while a man among us draws the breath of life, Miss Bertha," and quiet though the tone was, there was something wonderfully assuring in the words.

"I was thinking more of father than of myself," she said, in a more steady tone. "That man uttered such dreadful threats; his voice sounded so cruel, and his eyes seemed fairly on fire as he spoke!"

"An idle braggart. Never let thought of him trouble you, little one. He can work you no harm."

"But his friends? You said they would hunt him up!"

"Doubtless they will, if he has any near. But supposing they should; what can they do? Nothing to injure us. We hold possession of the valley, and can continue holding it against a far stronger force than they are at all likely to comprise, even should they be bold enough to try force."

"But there may be fighting—and some of us may be killed!" with a little shivering.

"And the stars may fall from the heavens and crush us to pulp," laughed Benedict. "Fie, little girl; this is not like you—borrowing trouble in advance, and picturing horrors which are scarcely within the bounds of probability, instead of looking on the brighter side of life, and cheering us poor rascals after our hard toil."

"I cannot help it," murmured the young woman. "There is a dreadful foreboding at my heart. It seems as though something frightful was about to happen, and the more I try to banish the thought, the more persistently it haunts me!"

"The result of a fit of indigestion, caused by lack of healthful exercise," laughed Benedict, gently dropping her hand as they gained the foot of the steep and rocky ascent. "Come—let's see if you have lost your nimbleness of foot. Never fear—I will follow close enough to catch you, should your foot slip. Now—forward!"

His cheerful humor seemed infectious, and with a light laugh her clouded brow cleared, and she clambered nimbly up the steep, sure-footed and graceful as a chamois.

Clay Benedict followed closely, but his assistance was not needed, and then they stood side by side upon the dam, with the wedge-shaped pond lying like a sheet of silver before them in the bright moonlight.

A slight but cooling breeze was sweeping across the water, feeling most grateful to their heated brows, and Bertha drew a long breath as she faced it.

"Delightful!" she exclaimed, removing the hat she had worn, and tossing back her curling locks.

"More than that—it is heavenly!"

Startled by the fervor with which he spoke, Bertha turned and glanced into his face, then involuntarily shrunk away a bit, still more startled by what she saw in his blazing eyes."

"Does that strike you as being rather hyperbolical?" he said, with a short laugh. "And yet it fails to express the full force of my feelings at this moment. With the prospect before me—with the vision which now fills my eyes, even as it fills my heart to overflowing—I would not exchange situations with the grandest angel in heaven! Do you ask why? Because they say there is nothing there in the so-called realms of eternal bliss, save purely platonic love."

"I do not understand you," faltered Bertha, her fair face flushing, her eyes averted, as she moved toward the path by which they had just ascended. "Father will miss me—will want me. I must go back."

But a firm hand detained her, with gentle force.

"Not yet, Bertha. This is too pleasant to be hastily exchanged for yonder sweltering furnace. You need the fresh air—and I—I need your presence even more."

She cast a shy, frightened glance up into his face, and what she read in those glowing eyes seemed to scare her still more. She murmured something—she could not have recalled the words she used an instant after the breath died away on her lips—and moved hastily toward the chute.

A brief frown darkened the lover's brow, but then he followed her lead, reaching her side as she paused beside the cut-off, one hand resting against the huge boulder which had, earlier in the day, caused Ralph Burnham such uneasiness of mind.

"It would be frightful to fall into that!" Bertha exclaimed, pointing to the swift hurrying waters that roared and swirled through the race, broken into foam here and there by pointed rocks which showed their dark crests above the surface. "It makes my head swim only to watch it dash along."

"The cure is easy; don't look that way," replied Benedict, with a slight smile.

"But I can't help it! It exerts a terrible fascination over my mind. If I was given to superstition, I would almost believe it a premonition—a warning that it was fated to be the doom of me or mine!"

She spoke hurriedly, almost incoherently, and it was plain to be seen that she had not yet fully recovered from her fright at his words and looks a moment since.

Benedict frowned again, as this thought occurred to him, but his voice was cool and steady as he responded:

"It would be a hard struggle, truly, were one to tumble into that race. But if the fellow was a strong swimmer, and did not wholly lose his head, he might save himself by taking advantage of some of those eddies—though he'd have little time to waste."

"It makes me dizzy. I must go back," murmured Bertha, turning from the water, to find her retreat barred by the figure of the young gold-digger.

"Are you quite sure it is the water you are trying to flee from, Bertha?" he asked, his voice low, but intense.

"Of course; what else?" she faltered. "Let me pass, Mr. Benedict. I must hasten back to father."

"The evening is young, and your father, dearly as he loves you, will not suffer greatly if you spend a few minutes more, little one," he whispered, his strong arms imprisoning hers. "While I—I have watched for a chance like this for days, and I cannot suffer it to escape me unimproved."

"Let me go! you have no right—"

"Shall I ever have that right, Bertha, my love—my angel—my all?" he breathed, his handsome face bending very close to hers, the mad passion overleaping all bounds.

A low, gasping cry escaped her lips, and she sought to free herself, but his grasp only tightened and held her powerless, while the words flowed from his lips more swiftly, more impetuously than the waters rushed along the race.

"I must speak, and you must listen, Bertha. I can contain myself no longer. I have watched and prayed for just such an opportunity as this, and now it has fallen in my way, I must improve it—must tell you why I sought it."

"And yet, little one, you must know what I would say. You are not so blind but what you have read my heart long since. You know that it is yours—has been yours even from the day of our first meeting. Ay! I loved you then with a love that was stronger, more intense, more perfect than man ever felt for woman before, and yet that passion has steadily grown more powerful, more idolatrous with the passage of each day, until now—words are far too feeble to express my love for you—actions alone can do them justice."

He bent his head still lower, and pressed his burning lips to hers, not once, but repeatedly, unheeding her convulsive struggles, until she freed one hand and struck him full in the face, a gasping sob accompanying the action.

Startled, he relaxed his fervent grasp, and the woman started back, for his person still barred the way.

There was naught of fear in her face or attitude now, and if she trembled it was because of indignation and injured modesty. Her voice rung out sharp, and even menacing:

"How dare you treat me so! Coward—villain that you are!" and her glorious eyes were flashing with a depth of fire such as he had never until now deemed them capable.

For a moment he stood amazed, then an humble expression replaced that of doubt and wonder, as he spoke softly:

"Pardon me, Bertha, if I offended. I was hardly conscious of my actions in the madness of my love—"

She cut him short with a swift, angry motion of her hand that might almost have been a blow.

"Madness indeed! Say insult, rather!"

His face flushed hotly at the word, then turned pale as death as he caught her hands and held them firmly imprisoned within his own.

"Listen to me, Bertha—nay, you must," as she struggled to free her hands. "I have the right to demand that much, no matter what else you may see fit to deny me."

"I admit that I have led a wild—some might even call it a reckless, if not actually criminal life—career thus far, but I stand ready to make amends and fully reform. I have sown my crop of wild oats, and believe I am none the worse for having done so. I have ample wealth, my family is one of the most haughty and purest blooded need not look down upon, and I can give my wife a home and position in society to be proud of."

"Why do you tell me this?" asked Bertha,

her face very pale, but her voice cold and steady as she fully encountered his burning gaze. "Pray, what can it interest me?"

"Because I offer them all to you, with only one drawback—myself," he said, bending his head toward her face, but pausing as she drew back once more. "Bertha, do you not yet comprehend my meaning? I ask you to be my wife."

"I thought you knew—did not father tell you?" she exclaimed, a puzzled expression coming into her eyes.

"Your father?" he echoed; then hastily added, "Yes, he did say something about your being disposed of—I think that was the term he used—but I attached little importance to his words at the time, and had entirely forgotten the fact until now. What did he mean?"

"What he said: that I have no right to listen to such words as you have spoken this night, even if I had the inclination—which I most assuredly have not!" with energy.

"Bertha! what am I to understand by this?"

"That you have insulted me most shamefully! How dare you, after being fully warned—"

His grasp tightened upon her hands, his eyes glowed with a light that was almost as lurid as the light of a coal-fire, his voice was husky and strained, as he said:

"Tell me, how are you bound? What did he mean by saying that you were disposed of?"

"That I am already a wife, and—"

"You—A WIFE!" he gasped, staggering back, dropping her hands to grasp his temples as he stared stupidly at her.

"Yes, I have been married nearly two years," she said, speaking hurriedly, and seeming to feel some compunction for the evident pain the startling communication gave him. "I thought you knew the truth. I'm sure father said he had told you all. I never dreamed of this. I thought you regarded me in the light of a friend—that you looked upon me as a sort of sister—or I would never have been so frank, so—I find it is very hard to express my meaning, you have so terribly startled me; but surely you understand?"

Tremblingly, almost incoherently she spoke, one little hand gently touching his sleeve, but then she started back with affright as he turned fiercely upon her.

"Ay! I understand this much: that you have played, with me as only a heartless coquette and shameless flirt can toy with the heart of an honest man. That you have led me on and on, laughing in your sleeve at my infernal folly and credulity—only to throw me over, now that you have brought me to land like a silly fish!"

"Stand aside and let me pass!" Bertha cried, her eyes flashing with indignation. "You are insulting, sir! You make a fool of yourself, and then vent your spite on a helpless woman. Had father been with me, you would not dare speak so!"

His hands tightened their grasp, and he lifted her light figure from the ground, taking one stride forward and pausing upon the brink of the madly flowing water, above which he held her poised, while he swiftly spoke:

"You remember your presentiment of a bit ago? The devil is whispering in my ear to loosen my grasp and make that horror a reality! Would it be a whit more cruel than your treatment of me? Would it not be poetical justice? Bah!" and he laughed savagely as she struggled to free herself. "You are no more than a babe in my hands. I hold your life at my mercy—I, to whom you have shown none. If I chose to doom you, no power of either earth or heaven could rescue you! And why should I not? You say you are too good for me. You call me villain and rascal—I, who love you better than life—love you even now, though you say you are a wedded wife—"

His voice choked, and he staggered back, lowering his arms, but still maintaining his grasp as she struggled to free herself, uttering a gasping cry for help.

There came a shout in response, and then the sound of hurrying footsteps. Bertha heard them, and struggled anew, Clay Benedict heard them, and glanced over his shoulder, but too late for self-defense.

A strong hand tore Bertha from his grasp, a heavy blow fell upon the side of his head, and throwing up his hands with a shrill oath, he toppled over into the chute, head foremost, to be grasped by the roaring waters and whirled away!

CHAPTER V.

BERTHA'S LITTLE ROMANCE.

As she saw Clay Benedict fall headlong into the race—as she beheld the frothing, whirling waters part and then close above his form, stifling the mad cry that seemed torn from his lips by that rescuing blow—Bertha Burnham forgot for the instant all that had gone before, save her sickening fear of the water demon, and a wild cry burst from her bosom.

"Save him! Heaven of mercy! he will perish! Save him!"

The appeal was purely mechanical. The poor girl realized not the words her pallid lips shaped,

for she had been so terribly shaken and wrought upon by that mad outburst of the hot-blooded lover, that she felt not the strong arms as it drew her back from the brink, saw not the athletic form beside her, in her overpowering agitation even fancying that her convulsive struggles to free herself had precipitated Clay Benedict into the water chute.

As he fell, the mad lover struck his head against one of the rocks which helped to form the many short, whirling eddies in the narrow channel, and though he was not wholly bereft of sensibility, his limbs seemed partially paralyzed, his wonderful strength was gone, and a gasping cry broke from his lips.

A single swift glance showed the rescuer the sole chance that remained, and dropping the form of the half-unconscious woman to the ground, he acted without hesitation, darting to a projecting rock some yards below where the brief encounter had taken place, kicking off his heavy rubber boots as he ran.

Not an instant too soon, with all his rapidity of action.

Beaten and buffeted by the foaming, raging waters—tossed from one rock to another—caught here by a whirling eddy and detained for an instant, only to be torn away again and hurled onward, nearer to the frightful death which must inevitably follow a plunge over the end of the chute, down nearly two score feet to the jagged boulders over which the element was dashed to a featherly spray—through the race whirled the barely conscious lover, unable to help himself, yet instinctively keeping his head above the surface, ever turning his face toward the bank from which he had been precipitated.

Down even with the point of rock on which the figure of the man whose heavy fist had hurled him into the water, crouched low, came the body, tossed and bandied back and forth by the merciless elements, and a sharp exclamation broke from the waiting man's lips, as a swirl from the opposite side reached out and caught the body, whirling it around still further from its only chance of being saved.

In that terrible crisis a gleam of light seemed to come to the clouded brain of Clay Benedict, and with it a portion of his wonted strength. With a desperate effort he turned upon his back, bringing his doubled-up feet against the bank, then straightened his lower limbs with all his vigor.

Straight across the chute he shot, and caught by the eddy below the point of rocks, his progress downward to certain destruction was once more checked.

It was only a spasmodic effort, however, and was not followed up as would have been the case had he retained full possession of his senses and bodily powers. Indeed, he could never explain how he came to act as far as he had.

Leaning far over the water, clinging to the rock, the man strove to grasp the floating body. His fingers barely touched one shoulder, then, as though jealous lest it be robbed of its victim, the capricious eddy sucked the body back, turning it slowly around, as though about to vomit it forth into the sweeping current once more.

"Save him! My God! will no one come?"

The wild appeal came from the lips of the almost distracted girl above, still failing to realize precisely what had occurred, but it was sufficient.

The moonlight saw that pale face become still more rigidly set, and resolved to accomplish her will, or perish with the man whom his strong right arm had stricken low, Vernon Curtis leaped into the raging waters and clutched Benedict by an arm, with a death-grip.

For a space, brief in duration, but an age in experience, the gallant fellow believed that the end had come for them both—that the current that tugged at their feet as he desperately fought to reach the point of rocks, must surely conquer and hurl them down to death and destruction.

Yet still he maintained his grip on the helpless man, holding his breath, grating his teeth until it seemed as though the enamel would split and crumble, fighting as only a strong, brave man can fight for life and against death.

Bertha heard the devoted cry with which he answered her frenzied appeal, and caught a glimpse of his form as he leaped into the water, and came running down to the point of rocks, kneeling there and outstretching her hands toward them.

The full moon shed its clear, silvery light around an' over her, outlining her figure against the rugged rocks, the white spray from the water dashing against the rock-point on its upper side, flying around her like a mystic halo; just below her, barely out of reach of her hands, the two men, one powerless to aid himself, though a conscious look was upon his face, the other bravely battling against such terrible odds—the whole forming a wild, weird tableau.

"I'll save him—for you—or die, Bertha!" came in short pants from the lips of the young miner.

A furious, breathless struggle that seemed beyond the power of merely mortal man to make, then the gallant battle was won so far that Vernon Curtis grasped a point of the rock on which the woman knelt, clinging to it with

a death-grip, despite the tugging of the boiling waters which strove to tear him away.

"Go bring aid!" he panted. "I can—do no more!"

She tore off her apron and flung one end to him. He could only catch it between his teeth, but it proved a valuable aid to his retaining the vantage he had so gallantly won.

Bracing herself against the strain, Bertha turned her face toward the camp, and cried aloud for aid, her voice rising high and shrill above the roaring of the waters. And almost immediately there came back the welcome reply, in the stentorian tones of Ralph Burnham as he rushed to the rescue.

None too soon. Whatever the cause, the eddy had changed, and was now tugging with terrible force at the two men, and steel-like though his muscles were, Vernon Curtis knew that he could not have held out another five minutes. But that was more than ample time for the veteran and those who came rushing close upon his footsteps, to grasp the stiffened arm and drag both men from the water.

"How come it an' who done it?" cried Burnham, as the rescue was effected; but he did not pause then for a reply.

Overcome by the terrible strain on both body and mind, Bertha fell at his feet in a swoon, and catching her up in his sturdy arms, the father hastened with her back to camp, leaving his mates to care for the young miners.

Bertha recovered her consciousness before the camp was reached, and dreading the consequences of her parent's rage should he learn the whole truth of the sad affair, she gave him only vague replies, listening and watching for the return of the others to the valley, the moment she heard them, begging her father bring them both to the tent.

Furious, anxious to learn just what had led to so nearly a fatal result, the veteran obeyed her, finding Vernon Curtis quite himself again, while Clay Benedict, though pale and weak from the terrible experience he had undergone, needed only rest and a night's sleep to be fully restored.

Curtis promptly complied with the request, nor did Benedict hesitate, though a cold sneer curled his pale lips.

Bertha met Curtis at the entrance of the tent, and hurriedly whispered the warning,

"Not a word of what you heard or saw, until after I have spoken. For my sake, I beg you!"

"I'd do more than that to please you, Miss Bertha," he said, simply, but there was a look in his large eyes that caused the young woman to droop her eager gaze, and brought an ominous frown to the brow of Clay Benedict as he approached.

"I've done your biddin', little one," said Burnham, a little impatiently. "The young fellers is here; though why you couldn't tell a body how it all come about without—"

As he spoke, Bertha glanced swiftly from one to the other of the young men, an anxious light in her blue eyes, but then, with a sort of desperation, she cut his speech short, speaking rapidly, her voice low but clear:

"It was all a dreadful mistake, father, and I fear both you and I are most to blame for what has occurred—thank Heaven it has proved no worse!"

"Me?" exclaimed the veteran, wonderingly. "Me to blame? An' I settin' down here, smokin' my pipe when I hear you fust holler out on top of the dam?"

"Listen, father—and you, gentlemen, I pray you suffer me to tell the story without interruption. Believe me, 'twill be the shortest and the best way for us all."

Vernon Curtis bowed in silence, but Clay Benedict made no sign, though his eyes were blazing redly, and his white face was hard and stern-set as death itself.

Ralph Burnham glanced from one to the other, a suspicion that all was not as it seemed on the surface, gradually beginning to shape itself in his brain. A stern expression replaced the puzzled look, and his voice grew harder as he said:

"Ef thar's bin any low-down play goin' on here, the one that's to blame he's got to answer fer it to me, mind that, now! An' you, child, tell the story straight as it come about, without loppin' off any corners to make it sound better."

"Father, did I ever speak falsely to you?"

"Nothin' wuss than white lies, an' not even them, ef I hed to take my oath to it," was the prompt response. "Tain't your lyin' I'm afraid of, but that you'll try to smooth it over by keepin' back part o' the truth."

"I'll save Miss Burnham the trouble by frankly confessing the part I played in this little drama," said Benedict.

"No—if you call yourself a gentleman, stop!" cried the young woman, starting to her feet with uplifted hand and powerfully agitated voice. "Let me have my say—"

"Look here!" cried Burnham, both looks and voice full of menace. "You two young rascals hain't got to squabbling over my little gal, an' chucked each other into the drink! Ef you hev, durned ef I don't wade in an' lick some stud-hoss sense into all two both o' ye—I will ef I die for't!"

"Father, let me speak. Hear me through. I beg of you."

"Which I mought as well, fust as last, I s'pose," he grunted, subsiding, but with a suspicious look still upon his rugged countenance. "Go ahead, an' cut it as short as ye know how, fer I'm kinder eetchin' to spout a bit, my own self."

"Father, you have not forgotten the request I made of you, long ago? I mean about your letting our new friends know the truth—telling them our reasons for taking this trip?"

"Pears to me you're goin' a monstrous long ways back to git at what happened only a hour ago."

"It is necessary that I should," said Bertha, her voice gaining steadiness. "You failed me, and hence I say that for what has this evening occurred, you and I are most to blame. If you had only spoken frankly, as you usually do—"

"Didn't I?" exclaimed the veteran, turning to the young gold-diggers with an injured air, as he added: "Leave it to you, lads, ef I didn't speak out straight as a die—ef I didn't tell you both that I wouldn't hev no monkeyin' 'round my gal, fer she was spos'd of fer good an' all—now didn't I?"

"I don't think you mentioned the fact of her being married, though," quietly retorted Clay Benedict.

Vernon Curtis uttered a sharp exclamation, and his usually ruddy cheeks turned pale as death as he looked toward Bertha, like one seeking a contradiction there, but her eyes eluded his, and there was a perceptible trembling in her tones.

"I believed you had told them all, or made your meaning so plain that there could be no room for mistakes, else I would have made the revelation myself."

"An' so I did—or ef I didn't, whose business was it, anyhow, outside of our own selves?" growled the old miner.

"It made this difference to one, at least," said Benedict speaking rapidly. "Under the impression that she was a single woman, free to be wooed and won by any honest man, I fell in love with her and asked her to marry me. If that is a crime, make the most of it."

"Father, I beg of you—let me tell them all, since it has come to this," hurriedly cried the young woman, but Ralph Burnham would not be silenced.

"You're like all the rest o' the women; you cain't putt a story into shape without veerin' an' yawin' all over the p'ints o' the compass. You've wasted enough time an' breath a'ready to tell the hull yarn twice over. Listen, you."

"When I lost the old lady—heaven rest her soul—an' only little Davy an' this little gal was left to keep me from cuttin' my throat or blowin' my brains out, mebbe I set them both up a little too high—specially Berthy, here."

"Anyhow, I couldn't bear to see any young sprouts come prancin' around in thar store duds, an' so I reckon I played the fool too fur, an' snubbed them too sharp, fer one of 'em—a likely young feller, too, which I couldn't say a word ag'in' cept I didn't want to give him my little gal—tuck to runnin' cunnin', like, an' fust I know, the trick was done."

"One day he left fer California, to join a fri'nd who hed struck a good thing an' kep' a openin' fer him, 'cordin' to 'greement, an' when he was good an' gone, Berthy come to me an' give me a letter which he'd writ afore he left. In it he tolle me that he loved the little gal too monstrous bad fer to give her up, even when her pap said he should, while he thought too much of us both to coax her to run away with him, afore he hed enough money laid by to keep her like a leddy. An' so, as the best thing they could do, he married her that very mornin' jest afore he tuck the train."

"A distinction without a difference!" sneered Benedict.

"Ef the gal is satisfied, an' I don't kick, I don't reckon it need trouble you," bluntly retorted Burnham.

"That was two year ago. The lad I kept us posted as to his doin's, an' when I found how white be writ, an' how well he was gettin' along—fer you kin be sure I didn't take his own say-so altogether, but made inquiries from them that would tell me the squar' facts—I sorter simr red down, an' afore long got so I really bl' e I thought nigh as much o' him as his own w' did."

"Waal, after a powerful sight o' thinkin', I made up my mind I'd take the little gal out to see her old man, an' to give him a kind o' sprise-party, we started without sendin' him word o' our comin'. As fer the rest, you know it all."

"Except one thing," added Bertha, her cheeks flushing vividly as she spoke hurriedly. "Only the minister who married us, besides we three, knew that—that it had happened. We kept it secret, to avoid havin' to answer questions and satisfy the curious. I never regretted that secrecy until this evening. I thought father had made all plain to y u, else my conduct should have been more res' ved, more—"

"You have nothing for which to blame your-

self, miss—I should say, madam," and Vernon Curtis flushed a little. "The most censorious could not find fault with your conduct ever since this journey began."

"You are kind, and I thank you most sincerely," said the young woman, extending her hand and pressing his warmly. "If I have wronged either of you gentlemen, however unconsciously, I trust you will not lay it up against me."

"And if either of us have injured or wronged you?" asked Benedict, a faint smile curling his lip, as he gazed intently into her fair face.

"You have my forgiveness, from the bottom of my heart."

He bowed low over the extended hand, but made no move toward taking it in his own. Her face paled as she drew back.

"That much is settled, then," said Burnham, overlooking this point. "Now how come it that you two lads got into the drink, up yender? That's what interests me the most, just now."

"Shall I act as historian, or do you prefer taking the role, madam?" asked Benedict, with a hard smile.

"It was all a mistake—a miserable misunderstanding," said Bertha, hastily, dreading his further speech. "I hardly know how it came about, myself. We were talking—"

"More definitely, I was asking her—believing her a heart and hand free maiden—to be my wife," interposed he.

"I was so startled that I believe I tried to escape by flight. My foot must have slipped, and in trying to save me from falling, Mr. Benedict must have slipped into the water. In my fright, I cried aloud for help, and Mr. Curtis came to the rescue. He leaped into the torrent and dragged him to the rock where you found them, father," hurriedly uttered Bertha, her eyes downcast, fearing to trust them under inspection.

"You saved me!" exclaimed Benedict, turning to Curtis, his voice hard and unnatural, his eyes glowing redly.

"For which I deserve no thanks," with a concealed meaning in his tones which Ralph Burnham alone failed to fully comprehend. "For, if I mistake not, it was my hasty coming that led to the accident, however firmly this lady may believe the fault was hers."

"If so, you nobly made amends by risking almost certain death to save his life after he fell into the water. He cannot hold any grudge against you for what has happened."

"Waal, I should re-mark!" cried Burnham, indignantly. "Hold a grudge fer doin' that? Clay ain't sech a pesky fool as you try to make him out, little one."

"Clay—Vernon," said Bertha, earnestly, taking their hands and joining them together while she added: "We have been the best of friends in the past, and I sincerely trust we will never be less cordial in our intercourse. Forget what has happened and shake hands. I beg it as a favor."

Vernon tightened his grip on the fingers of the man whom he had long suspected was his rival for the love of the wife whom they had deemed a maiden free, but his cheek flushed hotly as he felt no answering grip.

"I thank you—thank you both, most gratefully," said Bertha, believing the reconciliation perfect.

"Pears like you're makin' a beap o' fuss over nothin'. Course they're fri'nds. Good-night, lads; it's bed-time."

CHAPTER VI.

BUDD PAINTER GIVES WARNING.

THIS was too plain a hint to be ignored, and the two young miners turned and left the tent together.

As it was his turn to mount guard over the dam, Vernon Curtis turned in that direction, Clay Benedict keeping pace with him until they had passed beyond earshot of the miners who sat around the little camp-fire, smoking a final pipe before turning in for the night. Then he touched Curtis lightly on the arm, speaking coldly:

"One word with you, sir, before you return to guard duty."

"If you have anything of importance to say, certainly," was the prompt response, as the young gold-digger paused and faced the speaker. "Or, if you prefer it, we can do our talking on the dam, up yonder."

The last sentence issued impulsively from his lips as he caught the red gleam from the other's eyes, and noted the look of hatred imprinted upon his countenance.

"That I would prefer, as you must know, but it is altogether out of the question at present. The old man already suspects something of the truth, and were we to both leave camp now, he would follow to investigate before we could finish our little discussion."

Curtis made no response in words, simply nodding stiffly. In truth, he hardly knew what to say. The events and discoveries of that evening had completely bewildered him.

It being his turn to act as night-watchman over the dam, he had been thus engaged when Bertha and Benedict passed over to the chute, unnoticed by him, thanks to his having been further up the stream, on the opposite side.

But at the first sharp exclamation which broke involuntarily from Bertha's lips, Curtis wheeled and by the clear moonlight caught sight of the two figures beside the huge boulder near the mouth of the chute, though he did not immediately recognize either of them, his first thought being of treachery, of peril threatening the camp and its occupants, most likely through the evil agency of the mates of Budd Painter, their present captive.

Believing this, he stole swiftly but cautiously along to foil their dastardly purpose, only to be undeceived by the agitated voice of Bertha Burnham as she struggled to free herself from the frenzied grip of Clay Benedict, who was at that moment but little better than a madman.

What followed the reader has seen. Curtis acted promptly and on the impulse of the moment, not recognizing Benedict until the blow that hurled him headlong into the water was partly delivered. The reaction was instantaneous, and feeling that he had made a terrible mistake, he hardly needed the wild appeal of the young woman to risk his life in the desperate endeavor to rescue the man who had fallen before his strong right arm.

It was a noble action in more senses than one. Himself a lover of Bertha, though as yet he had not dared avow that passion, Vernon Curtis knew that Clay Benedict also worshiped her, and when he heard her so wildly implore him to save the drowning man, he felt that her choice had been made, that the dashing gold-digger had surely won her heart and love. Yet in the face of this crushing belief, he staked his own life against the frightful odds and won—for her sake.

He saw more clearly now, since the revelations made by the Burnhams. He felt that Bertha feared Benedict for some reason, and since the latter showed signs of a desire to quarrel with him, he was quite willing to give him the chance he seemed to seek.

"It was an adroit story she told the old man, of how I came into the water, but you and I both know she was not telling the exact truth. I've got an ugly lump on my head, where it struck against a rock, but on the opposite side is another made by a pair of knuckles."

"Exactly," was the cool retort, as Benedict paused. "I heard a lady crying for help. I saw her struggling in the grasp of a man, and of course I ran to help her. I struck hard—but if I had known who that man was, I dare say I should have thrown still more force into my blow."

"Yet she said you risked your life to save mine," slowly added Benedict, speaking like one who was holding his passions in check with no little difficulty. "Why did you do that?"

"Because she asked me, and because, at that moment, I began to fear I had made a mistake—that it was only a love-quarrel, in which I had too hastily interfered."

"You know better now?"

"I do; and if it was all to do over again, I'd think twice before taking the chances," said Curtis, with a short laugh.

"Good! You are frank, and that encourages me to be the same. No matter what the cause, or excuse, you struck me. I never yet forgave or forgot a blow, and I am too old to begin with this. Blow for blow, is my motto, and—"

"You'll git a heap more of 'em then you kin pay back, unless you give over this durn foolishin' an' call it squar'," interposed a stern voice, and Ralph Burnham rose up from behind a boulder, pressing in between the young men.

"An eavesdropper!" sneered Benedict.

"Durned ef I keer what ye call it, now I've got at the bottom o' this mixed up affair," was the sturdy retort. "I could see they was somethin' goin' on that you all didn't want me to smoke, an' so I tuck this way o' makin' the diskiavery. I ain't sorry, though it shows you up in mighty onagreeable colors, young feller. I've thought a monstrous heap o' you fer a like-ly lad, or blame my cats ef I wouldn't lend you a belt 'longside the cabeza that wouldn't be so easy got over as the clip you was jest talkin' about—I would so!"

"Don't let that stop you, if you are really spoiling for a rumpus, Mr. Burnham. Only it might be safer for you to hold your passions in check until daylight. It's hardly clear enough now to distinguish gray hairs, and if struck, I'd be mighty apt to return the blow."

"My hairs are not gray," pointedly uttered Curtis.

"Come, none of that!" sharply interposed the veteran. "You, Vern, git back to your duty a-watchin' of the dam; an' you, young pepper-pot, bridle your tongue a bit. Ef I was to call a council o' the men, an' tell 'em flatly jest what sort o' game you've bin playin' this night, what do you reckon'd be the consequence? A laryit or strap oil, an' plenty of it!"

Vernon Curtis turned away in prompt obedience, while Clay Benedict stood in sullen silence before the old man.

"Mebbe it's as Berthy says," added Burnham after a brief pause. "Mebbe I be to blame in part fer what has happened. Ef so, I'm sorry; fer I don't know when I met two young fellers I tuck a stronger fancy to then you an' Vern, an' I'd hate like fun to hev to treat either

o' ye with harshness. But one thing is sartin sure. We cain't hev you two growlin' an' snarlin' at each other all the time from this on. Unless you kin make up your minds to jine han's an' let the past slide, I'll call a council o' the lads an' let them decide which one is the most to blame. When they p'int him out, I'll give him his sheer o' the dust we've dug out, an' he kin travel wharever the notion strikes him—jest so it ain't in our comp'ny.

"That's plain talk, Clay, but it's straight. As a frien' an' well-wisher, I 'vise you to turn it over in your mind to-night, an' in the mornin' I'll come to ye fer your answer."

Without waiting for the young man to speak, Ralph Burnham turned and followed after Vernon Curtis.

Benedict watched him until his figure was lost amid the shadows which lurked around the foot of the rocks, then turned and strolled over to where Budd Painter was placed for the night, in as comfortable a position as possible for a man whose hands and feet were firmly pinioned.

One of the miners was sitting near him, acting as guard.

"I'll take your place for a few minutes, Fisher," said Benedict, quietly. "I've been having a little talk with the boss, and thought I'd come over and see if I could learn anything from this fellow."

The miner was willing enough to transfer the duty, and nimbly arising, passed over to where his fellows were earnestly discussing the present situation of affairs.

Benedict took his place, filling and lighting his pipe, covertly eying the prisoner while thus occupied.

Savagely, sullenly, the Hard Man from 'Way Back watched him, his breath coming hard and short, his bloodshot eyes glowing like those of an enraged wild beast.

"Old fellow, you're a precious fool!" abruptly said Benedict, puffing a cloud of smoke toward the captive. "Here you are, trussed up like a pig for market, instead of roaming at your sweet will through the spacious confines of this delightful valley of bliss and peacefulness—and all because you refuse to exercise your tongue a trifle when asked."

An inarticulate growl that might well have been a curse, was the only response, but Benedict imperturbably resumed:

"Even yet it may not be too late. Mind you, I'm not asking you to promise to keep your ugly paws off me, for just at the present time, a little excitement of that sort would not come amiss—"

"Then set me free!" eagerly muttered the prisoner, his assumed stoicism vanishing like magic. "I don't ax you to give me back my tools. Only cast off these cussed ropes an' let me hev the free use o' my arms fer five minnits, an' ef you don't git all the 'citemen' you want to chaw on fer a lifetime, then I'm a howlin' liar an' a bandy-legged ground-hog. Jest fer five minnits."

For a brief space Clay Benedict hesitated, strongly tempted to grant the fellow's wish, for in fact he felt that unless he could find some means of speedily venting at least a portion of the pent-up passions with which his heart and brain were fairly ablaze, he must go mad.

The Hard Man from 'Way Back watched his face as closely as the uncertain moonlight would permit, hoping, yet fearing for the result, and then he huskily added:

"Twon't take but a minnit. Jest slit off these farnal tugs an' we kin settle it fer good, an' all long afore them chuckle-headed galoots over yender kin smell a mice. Do it an' feel fer once like a white man. Dare an' double dare ye to do it. The man as takes a dare 'll steal a sheep, an' a sheep-stealer's the low-downdest critter that crawls over the face o' the foot-stool. Agh gh-h! I knew it!" he added, with a snort of supreme disgust, as his eager watchfulness told him the momentary indecision had left the face of his hated enemy. "You're weakenin'; you're losin' your grip; what teeny bit o' sand you ever hed is runnin' out at the tips o' your fingers, an' you wouldn't fight a sick kitten, onless you could ketch it asleep an' hed along a kipple o' bulldogs fer to hold it while you did the maulin' with a twenty-foot pole. Git out! You ain't nuther white, red nor black; fish, flesh nor vegitable; but the pot-scrapin's an' dish-washin's of a low-down two-cent restraint, an' scatter the cholery whenever the wind blows across ye. Git out, you!"

So intense was his disgust, so fierce his hatred, that Painter spat with all his force straight at the white, sneering face before him, but, luckily, perhaps, for his lease of life he missed his aim, and before he could repeat the attempt, Clay Benedict altered his position for another where his face was concealed in the shadow.

"Another attempt like that, my fine fellow, will end in your having a tough mouthful to chew on for the remainder of the night," said Benedict, sternly, but in low, guarded tones. "I came here to serve you, if you will let me do it. I can't promise to set you at liberty right away, because I am only a deck-hand here, and the boss has the say-so; but I can make your situation more comfortable—"

"Durn the comfort!" growled the tough citizen, sullenly. "Ef you won't turn me loose to git even fer that coward shot, then I hain't no use fer you. Skin out, an' le' mo 'lone!"

"Have a little patience, old man, and I promise to give you all the revenge you can get away with," was the cold retort. "We will pull out of this hole in a few days, at the furthest, and then I'll fight you how and where you elect. In the mean time, I'll see that you have decent treatment, if you only prove yourself capable of appreciating generosity."

"You kin *talk*, but I hain't got no use fer a p'izen critter that cain't or won't do nothin' else. Git out an' le' me sleep."

But Benedict would not accept the rebuff without a further effort to gain his ends, and smoothly resumed:

"You will lose nothing by trusting to my pledge. I will try my best to get you set at liberty to-morrow, if you will frankly tell me the truth in answer to the questions I have come here to ask you. Is it a bargain?"

The Hard Man from 'Way Back hesitated for a few moments before answering, trying to twist his head around sufficiently for to look into the face of his visitor. Benedict divined his wishes, and moved back to his former position, saying:

"Don't try that dirty trick again, or I'll have you gagged. Smother your blind, unreasoning hatred, and try to realize the truth: that I am more friend than enemy, if you will meet me half-way."

"What is it you want o' me?"

"Truthful answers to a few plain questions. How did you come here? Was it blind chance, or had you a suspicion that gold was to be found in this place? How many mates had you? When did you leave them, and where may they be found now? In short, want to know all about you and yours."

"An' ef I tell you, you'll z-t me free!"

"I'll do my best," promptly, eagerly. "As I told you, it does not rest wholly with me to decide."

"Then you kin peel out as soon as you gits a good ready. I'll wait an' make a barg'in with the boss, fer I'mbettin' big money that you're tryin' to play me fer a sucker."

The eyes of the young miner glittered angrily, and he was on the point of uttering a hot reply, when his keen ears caught the sound of footsteps, and glancing in that direction, he saw that Ralph Burnham was approaching the little band congregated around the campfire.

Choking down the words that trembled on the point of his tongue, he arose and glided away among the shadows.

Budd Painter was seated so that he could watch those by the fire, and as he recognized the veteran on coming into the circle of light, his eyes glittered, and a half-angry, half-exultant sound escaped his lips.

Burnham seemed a little surprised on noticing Paul Fisher among the party, and addressed him sharply:

"Wasn't you sot to watch the prisoner, mate?"

"Which I was doin', when Benedict come an' tolle me he'd take my place fer a bit, as he wanted to talk a little with the cantankerous critter," was the prompt reply.

His bold brow contracting a trifle, Burnham turned to the spot where the prisoner was stationed, but before he could speak Painter addressed him:

"The man spoke true, old codger, an' ef you want to blame anybody, spit it out on the dirty cuss that owes me a shot."

"Where is he now?"

"Gone—stole away like the p'izen sarpint he is, when he ketched sight o' you comin' back. Feared you'd ketch him parleyin' with me, I reckon."

"Why shouldn't he talk with you, if he wants?"

"Look here, *you*," said the Hard Man from 'Way Back, leaning the free portion of his body forward and speaking with great earnestness. "I hain't got no cause to love you, or anybody else in this outfit, a'ter the way I've bin treated; but of I'm down on you, I hate that dirty coward ten thousand times more yit."

"That all may be," was the stern response. "But Benedict only shot you down to save the lives of whiter men. You hed ought to be thankful that he only creased your thick skull, 'stead o' borin' it clean through, as he could 'a' done a monstrous sight easier."

"An' so I be," laughed the tough citizen, with a grim ferocity that startled the old gold-digger. "So terrible thankful that ef we two ever meet on a even footin' ag'in, I'm thinkin' he'll never git over the dose o' gratitude I've swore to ram-jam down his thrapple!"

"I reckon the lad'll get a mouthful or two, while you're makin' a squar' meal. He ain't no slouch, when it comes to hot vittles o' that sort. But it's you an' him for it."

"Mebbe you cain't see as fur through a knot-hole as you think, an' mebbe you don't know the p'izen critter as weel as you 'low you do. Boss, I told you I hedn't overly much cause fer to love you or yours; but hatin' him so much wuss,

I'll give ye a little hint fer ye to chaw on tonight."

"That whelp come here an' told me he'd see that I was sot free in the mornin', ef I would treat him as a fri'nd, an' tell him who all was my mates, an' whar he mought find 'm."

"I made you the same offer in the fust place."

"But not the same way he done it," earnestly replied the prisoner. "Thar was the devil in his eyes an' in his voice as he spoke, though he tried hard enough to hide 'em over, an' not let me smoke what he was tryin' to git at."

"I don't know whether you've given him any cause fer to hold a grudge ag'inst you all; but this I do know, an' I'm ready to take my oath that you'll find I've hit the bull's-eye plum' center, too; that man is a cussed snake in the grass. He wants to find out ef I hed any mates, so he kin sell you out to them. Watch him cluss, an' you'll see that I'm right."

Ralph Burnham laughed, in quiet scorn.

"I don't say you're hatchin' all this up, my man; but I reckon you've let your hate ag'inst the lad p'izen your judgment. Hot an' rash the boy may be, but I'd lay my head on his truth, an' honor, an' squar' dealin' with his fri'nds."

"Ef that piller don't give you the wust nightmare out o' jail, then I don't know my head from a hole in the ground—that's all!" grunted the tough citizen, settling back into his former position with an air of utter disgust.

Ralph Burnham called Paul Fisher to resume his duty, then turned toward his tent. But before he reached this, he was met by Clay Benedict, who spoke in a low, grave tone:

"I have been looking for you, old friend. May I have a few moments' conversation with you? I have a confession to make before I can think of sleeping this night."

"Sure, lad," kindly returned the veteran. "It does my old heart good to hear you talk in that tone so different from what you used a bit ago. Not that I'm blamin' ye—"

"You have a right to blame me, old friend—none better, for I have wronged both you and yours, by my insane conduct this night," gloomily said the young gold-digger, slowly moving away from the tents in company with the veteran.

"At first I could not bring myself to acknowledge as much, for then my brain was still in a whirl and all confused by the terrible revelation Ber—your daughter made."

"I could kick myself from here to California fer not makin' it all plainer to ye, lad, when the little gal told me," muttered Burnham, in a tone of sincere regret. "I thought you understood it, an' we didn't want the folks to know too much, fer Berthy was kind o' tetchy on the subjec', an' didn't like the idee o' hevin' to make so many explanations."

"I can understand that. I am not blaming either her or you. My conduct has been such that I have no right to do so. Not that I am ashamed of having fallen in love with her," he quickly added. "That is no disgrace to any man, and though I know now that she can never be anything closer to me than a friend, I can honestly say that I would far rather have her friendship than the best love of any other woman the sun shines on. But let that pass, for now."

"I sought you out to make full and free confession, leaving you to say whether I have forever forfeited my old standing with you and yours."

"Though she may have believed what she said, your daughter was mistaken in the account she gave you. When she told me she was already a wife, I believe I went crazy, though I can now recall every word I said, every move I made in those terrible moments."

"I am not trying to justify myself to you, more than by telling the simple truth, but I do ask you to bear in mind my overpowering love for her—to remember how insanely I idolized your daughter. I would have died for her sake, and counted it a blessed boon. I felt that life, with her to share it, would be more than heaven; without her, worse than hell itself!"

"In my madness, I fancied she had lured me on—had sought to make me love only to display her power—and I longed to avenge my wrongs. She did not slip and fall, nor did I tumble into the race while endeavoring to save her."

"I caught her in my arms and held her over the water, threatening to hurl her in, to death. Whether in my madness I would have carried my threats into execution I cannot say now, though I cannot bring myself to believe it, now my brain has had time to grow cooler; but I was making the threat when Vernon Curtis came to the rescue, and with a blow of his fist, knocked me headlong into the race, at the same time tearing your daughter from my grasp."

He paused abruptly, his voice so husky with powerful emotion as to prevent further utterance. Ralph Burnham took his hand, pressing it warmly, his voice grave as he spoke:

"You must a' bin mad, lad, clean crazy; but it's past now, an' we won't rake it up no more."

"There is more to tell," said Benedict, recovering his powers of speech. "When your daughter joined our hands in there, I refused to return the clasp, for in my blind folly I fancied

she favored him above me—and why should she not?"

"I can see the truth, now that I am calmer, and a part of the reparation I have set myself, is to go and frankly ask *his* pardon. Will you accompany me?"

"Won't I?" ejaculated the honest old miner, his voice betraying the great satisfaction he felt. "I'd walk from here to the blessed moon an' back ag'in without bite or sup, jest to fetch all things back ag'in as they was afore this pesky misunderradin' come up. Let's go. He's up on the dam."

Clay Benedict followed the eager old man, and in a few moments they stood face to face with Vernon Curtis, whose turn it was to guard the waters.

Hastily Ralph Burnham explained the cause of their visit, wishing to make the reconciliation as easy a task for Clay as lay in his power, and there, near the spot where one man had hurled the other to what seemed must be certain death, their hands were joined in a warm, firm grip.

"Good lads, both o' ye!" exclaimed Burnham, taking their hands into his honest grip. "You cain't neither o' ye feel gladder that it's all settled so nice, then I be—not a mite—fer I like ye both as though you was my own sons, an' I'm only sorry I hain't got two more little gals, jest like Berthy, so I could give 'em to you to make you happy forevermore."

Another hand-clasp, then the two men returned to camp, leaving Vernon Curtis to keep his lonely watch on the dam.

CHAPTER VII.

BIRDS OF A FEATHER.

FATE had so decided it that Clay Benedict was to act as forager for the little company of gold-diggers on the day which next followed the unwelcome visit of the Hard Man from 'Way Back, and with the prospect of a long journey still before them, ere they could reach their destination, it was not deemed advisable to cease their efforts to procure fresh meat to eke out their failing stock of provisions.

Many and earnest were the warnings given the hunter by honest old Ralph Burnham, and with a grave, chastened expression upon his pale countenance, Clay Benedict listened as to the speech of an oracle, then promised to bear it all in mind.

"Don't let off your gun jest fer the fun o' smellin' powder, lad, nur afore ye git a idee o' who they mought be inside o' ear-range," he added earnestly, just before parting with the young man who, since his frank and humble confession of wrong-doing of the past night, was doubly dear to his honest old heart. "We'd ruther live on wind puddin' a day or two than to hev anythin' happen to you, to say nothin' o' hevin' a wheen o' cusses like that crooked stick over yender come swaggerin' down onto us, to bother our work, an' like's not kick up a bloody rumpus."

Possible it was because of this warning that Clay Benedict suffered several good chances for killing game to pass unimproved that day. Whether or no, such was the case, and had any curious eyes been watching his movements that morning, it would have been remarked that, instead of seeking game in the low-lying and sheltered valleys the hunter kept to the highest land, scaling rocky points as though with the idea of extending his scope of vision.

The forenoon was well spent before he made any discovery that appeared to give him satisfaction. His eyes glittered, his pale cheeks flushed, and his white teeth showed themselves beneath his black mustache as he drew a small compass from his pocket and proceeded to take the direction of—not deer or elk or other quarry for the hunter's rifle, but a dim, uncertain line of blue smoke, slowly ascending through the almost motionless atmosphere.

Descending the peak, Clay Benedict lost sight of the smoke, but that caused him scant uneasiness, for he knew that an occasional glance at his compass would set him aright and prevent his straying widely until he again sighted the tell-tale signal in which he felt such a deep interest.

His rapid pace slackened as he drew nearer to the spot from whence the smoke arose, and at length he was almost crawling along upon his stomach, taking advantage of every point of cover that presented itself, pausing frequently to peer out from beneath some bush or shrub, more than once backing for a considerable distance to take another course which struck him as being more favorable to his hopes.

Caution enough to have satisfied Ralph Burnham, could that worthy have witnessed the maneuvers of his young mate, though the veteran might have felt like chiding the daring youngster for venturing still closer to what was undoubtedly the encampment of a party of white men, and thus endangering their precious secret of golden treasure.

The camp was situated in a secluded little valley, surrounded on all sides by rugged rocks and gravelly steeps which were relieved only by scattering patches of juniper and stunted firs, with here and there a creeper or ashen sage.

In the bottom of the hollow, a small spring

found birth, and beside this the camp had been pitched.

For a few rods around, grew a short, coarse grass, on which a few horses were grazing, though there was little above the roots left to satisfy their hunger.

Hanging from spurs of rock were the carcasses of a brace of deer, while another of the same species was then being cut into strips by the nimbly handled knives of two men, several of whose fellows had just completed a rude sort of scaffolding, formed of stakes and twisted raw-hide, beneath which they were spreading a scanty fire, evidently for the purpose of jerking the venison.

Clay Benedict, from his cover under the vines which wreathed a massive boulder, scanned these men closely, but then his gaze became riveted upon the figure of still another man, reclining in the shade cast by a mighty boulder, either asleep or idly watching the movements of his mates from beneath the drooping brim of his slouched felt hat.

The hunter turned white and red by turns, his eyes gleaming strangely as he stared, his fingers twitching nervously as they handled his rifle, their owner seemingly in doubt how to act, or what to do. But only for a short time.

Silently leaning the weapon against a rock, where it could instantly be grasped if the occasion arose, Benedict picked up a small pebble, and, drawing back his right hand, cast the stone over the top of the rock, across the intervening space, so that it fell just beyond the lazily-reclining figure, eagerly watching the result.

It was all that he could desire, for, at the faint sound of the dropping missile, the man quickly sprung to a sitting posture and glanced in that direction, giving the hidden man a fair view of his profile.

A faint, hissing laugh parted the thin, red lips, and Clay Benedict muttered below his breath:

"Just as I thought! If he hasn't forgotten the old signal in the years that have elapsed—I'll risk it, anyhow!"

Covering his lips with his hollowed palms, he gave vent to a peculiarly-modulated whistle, eagerly watching the effect it produced upon the man beyond, his eyes gleaming like those of an aroused serpent as he beheld him leap to his feet and glare around him, seeking to discover from whence the sound proceeded, while his fellows uttered sharp exclamations of surprise and doubt, one crying aloud:

"It's the old man come back at last, I reckon!"

"Silence, fool!" snarled the man who had been taking his ease while others worked. "That's not Painter's signal."

His speech was cut short by a repetition of the whistle, this time followed closely by an indescribable sound that drew a cry of wonder from his lips.

"It's the devil, or a ghost—"

"Not the last, most assuredly," cried Benedict, still hugging his cover closely as he added: "Keep your men from pulling trigger, Jeff Archer, and I'll show up to satisfy you."

"Drop your tools, boys—it's a friend," hastily cried the other. "Show yourself, Tiger Jim—for you it must be, or else the devil has sold our old signal to some one else!"

"Tiger Jim it is," laughed Benedict, rising from his covert and advancing with outstretched hand, "though I little thought to hear that title pronounced by the voice of an old pard in these regions. How goes it, gentle Jefferson?"

With a joyous cry, Archer grasped the proffered hand, wringing it vigorously as he almost hopped up and down in his fantastic glee at the unexpected meeting.

"It is you, for a fact! And here I've been wearing mourning the past three years and paying for masses to get your jolly old soul out of Satan's clutches—may woodsticks and sand-fleas bore your old hide to a riddle, man, for a blessed old fraud, if a sight of your ugly mug don't make my heart fairly slop over with glad—once more, and hearty, pard!"

"Then you haven't quite forgotten your old side pard, and the jolly days of yore!" laughed Benedict, his eyes aglow.

"Forgotten!" with a sonorous oath. "Does this look like it? Man, dear, I live 'em over in my dreams every night, and often wake up to curse the crooked luck that wiped you out and broke up the old gang!"

"So you were deceived by the report of my death, too? I took care not to contradict it, for I knew the boys were gone, and when I could learn nothing of you, after I came out into the world again, I fancied you too had turned toes up for good and all. So I dropped the old name, as I then thought, forever, and took to the respectable lay for a change. It worked well enough for a time, but now—Jeff, old pard, if I could have had my choice between meeting you and taking a front seat with the angels in heaven when I croak, I'd say give me my pard—ever since last night."

"Of course; more fool you if you wouldn't," was the matter-of-fact response. "You know me, and up yonder I reckon you'd find yourself among strangers, for precious few of our sort

ever cut their lucky with their baggage checked for that seaport! But why last night in particular?"

Benedict cast a swift glance over the faces of the five men who were eagerly listening to the conversation.

"I'll tell you—but I'm leg weary, so suppose we take a squat-down in the shade, somewhere. I never could talk when standing up, anyway."

Jeff Archer had no difficulty in comprehending his meaning, and turning to his men, spoke sharply:

"Get to work, you lazy rascals. Fuel is too scarce to waste like that, and if you let that meat spoil, I'll set you to chawing on your saddle blankets. Lively now."

Benedict led the way up the little valley to a distance sufficiently great from the spring, to carry on a conversation in ordinary tones, without running the risk of being overheard by the others, then dropped down in the shade.

"What sort of fellows have you got yonder?" he asked.

"Prime," was the instantaneous reply.

"Not too scrupulous?"

"Not one whit more scrupulous than we were, in the old days when we run a movable toll-gate."

"Ready to make a good stake if the opportunity offers, I suppose, without looking too closely at the means used?"

"What do you call a good stake nowadays?"

"How would a thousand apiece suit them?"

"So well that were you to offer them one-half the sum to slit the throat of father or mother, they'd break their necks in their haste to finger the dust! For a fact, old fellow, we're most awfully down on our luck just now. I don't believe we could squeeze enough out of our whole party to pay for a gallon of red-eye. We spent every red preparing for a big haul, down country, and slipped up on it so mighty bad that we not only made a fizzle, but come cursed near making a sizzle, for if we had been caught, that's about the way we would have fared—been roasted without judge or jury!"

"I'm glad of it—"

"Kind, you are!" grunted Archer, with a hard laugh.

"Because, only for that slip-up, I wouldn't have this chance to throw a better thing in your way," hastily.

"We counted on fingering five thousand apiece—"

"I can see that, and go you as much more better—for yourself, I mean—if you care to fall in with my plan."

Archer stared at the speaker as though suspecting a jest rather than earnest, but Benedict met his gaze without change.

"I'm giving it to you straight as a die, pard. I'll be as good as my word, if not better. But first, what brought you to this part of the country just now? Not chased so far?"

"No, not exactly; but we raised such a storm by our slip-up, that we concluded our health would be better the further west we go. Hang it all, man, laugh if you will, but we came out here on a gold-hunting expedition."

Benedict laughed grimly, as he nodded to where lay a lot of mining-tools, among the rocks.

"I rather suspected as much, but I thought I'd wait and see how much confidence you placed in your old partner."

"You didn't think I'd hide the truth from you?"

"I knew the old Jeff Archer wouldn't; but men change as the years roll by, and how was I to make sure you hadn't altered with the rest?" was the cool retort.

"Fact is, I was ashamed to mention it," said Arthur, grinning. "I never enlisted in a wild-goose chase of the sort before, nor will I try it on again, if ever we find our way safe out of this infernal desert. I thought I tested the infernal scoundrel thoroughly before starting; but I reckon he's played it on me, after all. One thing; he'll never brag over it, if I once clap my eye on his hide—that's flat!"

"You mean Budd Painter, the Hard Man from 'Way Back, as he calls himself?" asked Benedict, quietly.

"What do you know of him?" cried Archer, in amazement.

"Not as much as I would like to know. Perhaps you can supply a missing link or two? Where did you stumble across him, and how did he give you the slip?"

"It was just when we were at the last ditch; hadn't a dollar to cross ourselves with; out of grub as well, and as thoroughly lost as though we had been picked up at night, and set afloat in the middle of the ocean on a chip. We'd lost all bearings, and were afraid to strike out for fear of runnin' into some of the bloodhounds who were chasing us, when Painter dropped in on us, and showed us the way out of the wilderness."

"There was a good deal of pumping done on both sides, and in the end I reckon we panned out about even on the score of morality and all that rot. Painter offered us what we thought might prove a good thing, and fitted us out with tools, as you see; then led us this far, in

search of a bonanza, only to give us the slip before we opened our eyes yesterday morning; but what he expected to make by it, puzzles me! He didn't take a single tool, and left both his mule and his rifle behind."

"That don't look much like his running away," laughed Benedict.

"I know; and it's just what we concluded, when we roused up to find him *minus*. We thought he'd only gone out for a stroll, to scout about, and expected him back every minute. But he hasn't come yet, and we had about given him up, for though we hunted all yesterday afternoon, we couldn't strike his trail, or learn anything about him."

"Late last night the boys ran into a herd of deer and knocked over those three, and this morning we concluded to jerk a lot of the meat, to stand us through the back-trip, if the ugly cuss didn't put in an appearance before the morning."

"But you can tell us something about him! Where is he, and what has he been up to?"

"Wait a bit. What sort of man is he, anyhow?"

"Well, unless rumor lies most abominably, he's just the tough citizen he lays claim to being. We spent a week out-fitting, and Painter ran the town to suit himself. A frown of his seemed enough to create a panic, and if one-half the yarns we heard told when he was out of hearing had any foundation in truth, a worse dare-devil and fire-eater never drew the breath of life. He had a private graveyard wherever he hung out over night. He had the strength of a dozen men, and the bull-courage of a hundred. He could do anything with rifle, revolver, knife or any other weapon you could name. He never forgot a wrong, and never started for a man but he fetched him to score in the end. In a word, he was a perfect demon—to take the say-so of the men who knew, or pretended to know, him best," concluded Archer, with a short laugh.

Benedict echoed the laugh, sneeringly, as he said:

"Some such reputations have been easily won, simply because the owner was smart enough to pick his men shrewdly. But what is your opinion of him, from personal observation?"

"That he would make a better friend than enemy. I've seen him perform some wonderful feats with the pistol and rifle, and I don't think he lacks sand to back up whatever he undertakes. At any rate, if I wanted to quarrel with him, I'd take precious good care to secure the drop before the music began to play."

"Are any of your lads in love with him? Would they go into mourning if he was never to turn up again?"

"Not a bit of it," quickly. "He was too overbearing, too insolent, for that. More than once there would have been blood spilt only for me, and I would not have interfered to save him if I hadn't depended on him to find that bonanza for us."

"So much the better, for, unless I'm way off in my judgment, Budd Painter will be called on to pass in his checks before many more days," and Benedict laughed shortly.

"What do you mean by that? Where is he?" asked Archer.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE TRAIN LAID.

CLAY BENEDICT laughed pleasantly as he leaned back against the rock, chipping bits of tobacco from a plug, then kneading the fragments finer in the palm of his left hand, with the knuckles of his right.

"Bound hand and foot, resting uneasily on a portion of the very bonanza he promised to show you, I have not the faintest shadow of a doubt."

Jeff Archer flung out one hand, with an air of impatience as his former partner in evil paused to fill and light his pipe, but then, as though experience told him it was useless to fight against the peculiar humor of the man he called Tiger Jim, he assumed an air of patient resignation which he was far from feeling.

"Take your time, old fellow, and tell your story after your own fashion. That meat won't be cured for a couple of days, and I can afford to give you that much time to reach the point."

"Which is sarcasm," laughed Benedict, his pipe well alight at length. "I can get along with half as much, if you don't interrupt me too frequently with your pointed observations and leading questions."

"To begin at the beginning and make a clear trail as we go along, I shed my title and character of Tiger Jim, directly after that annoying little affair of which, no doubt, you retain some remembrance, and became so modest and pious that, actually, I began to feel the pin-feathers starting through the skin over my shoulder-blades!

"My reasons for playing such a foreign part? At first, to the better bide my real character, but then I had still fairer cause given me, in the guise of a little angel in petticoats, who quickly opened my eyes to a fact which I had never before so much as suspected—that I had a heart!"

"To cut it short, I tumbled over head and ears in love with the dainty darling, but before I could fairly recover from the shock that discovery gave me, I found out her father was making preparations for an overland trip to California, taking the girl and her younger brother with him.

"I at once resolved to make one of the party, and did so. Others joined us, and by the time we started, there were four wagons in the train, and a round baker's-dozen of people, including myself; none too many, though, if the red-skins should conclude to give us a brush by the way.

"The old man, parent of my divinity, was among the first to take in California when the gold-fever broke out, and he came along this route, passing close by and noticing the very bonanza your Hard Man from 'Way Back led you hero to work, though at the time he was too green to make the discovery of gold. He never forgot it, however, and so selected this trail on the present trip, to prove whether or no his surmises were correct, but for fear of failure, keeping his real reasons to himself.

"Little over a month ago we washed out our first dust, and the old man showed us the bonanza in good earnest. Two weeks of tough work laid it fairly open to us, and since then we have been raking in the dust and nuggets at a most wonderful rate."

Something very like an oath broke from the lips of the eagerly-listening man, as Benedict paused to catch breath.

"Then Painter told the truth? And we only missed it by a month! The devil's own luck!"

"How so? If you get your share of the gold, and find it ready dug to your hand, why need you growl?" laughed Benedict.

"Then you mean—"

"To finish my yarn, if you will permit," interposed Clay Benedict, taking a malicious pleasure in keeping his old pard on the tenterhooks. "I believe you asked me about Painter?"

Jeff Archer gave a sullen grunt, but vouchsafed no further reply, and the treacherous miner nodded approvingly.

"Good lad! Learn every lesson as perfectly, and you'll rise in the world—if only by the aid of a stout rope with a snug slip-noose in the end of it. But about Budd Painter:

"He came blundering into our camp yesterday, and though he showed his teeth like a true bulldog when crowded, I dropped him with one of my snap-shots, before he had time to do us any serious injury."

"You didn't kill him?" asked Archer, quickly.

"No; just creased him enough to let the boys put on the bilboes without having to fight too hard. The fellow had said just enough to make us suspect that he was not alone in the neighborhood, and I fancied I could draw the truth out of him by close questioning; but to do the fellow justice, he kept a mouth close as a clam. The boss sent out men to scout the vicinity, and he must have stumbled over your trail, though the soil was so dry and hard that he couldn't make out its meaning very perfectly. As a result, we concluded to keep your pard close prisoner until we could clean out the pocket, unless his fellows stumbled over us in the same fashion, when we were to fight for our rights, though an army showed up."

"At that time I was one of the hottest of the hot, but that same evening something occurred that cooled me off and worked a remarkable conversion in my case. Never mind just what that something was. You may learn in time, or I may conclude to keep it a secret. In either case it concerns you just this far: gives you a chance to make a rich stake, if you care to join hands with me in striking a bold blow."

"Against your friends?"

"They are my enemies, not friends," savagely grated the traitor, his eyes glowing redly, his face flushing with evil passions. "I hate them worse than poison—bah!" with a short, hard laugh. "The old name brings with it the old nature, and the world shall see that Tiger Jim is not dead yet."

"I'm with you, when, where and in whatever you mark out as worth the powder and lead," was the prompt assurance. "If you say so, we'll form a new band to take the road again, and I reckon we can discount the old record—"

"Not any in mine, if you please," interposed Benedict, with a positive shake of the head. "That line of business is getting overdone already, and there is more money to be made in other ways. This one little job, and I mean to sink Tiger Jim and the past so deep that it won't even be resurrected when Father Gabriel blows his horn on the last day."

"How much money is there in the job? You said a bonanza, but that word covers a mighty wide range."

"Enough to satisfy even your avarice, my good fellow," coolly replied Benedict, knocking the ashes out of his pipe and restoring it to his pocket. "Just how much that is I will leave you to figure out for a bit while I take a closer look at these fellows of yours. Of course I don't doubt your assurance that they are rank rascals, ready to cut a purse or slit a weasand

with grace and dexterity, but I'll feel more confidence if I have tested the timber myself."

"No need to get up; let *them* do the walking," said Archer as Benedict arose to his feet. "I'll bring them over here, and trot them out for you in a jiffy," he added, crooking a finger in his mouth and blowing a sharp, clear blast.

With admirable promptness, the five men caught up their rifles and hastened to the spot where their chief lay, curiosity regarding the visitor, and his intentions probably having quite as much to do with their celerity as discipline, though Archer complacently appropriated the credit to himself.

"My good fellows," he said with an affected yawn, "you have all heard of a gentleman called Tiger Jim, the smartest confidence-man, the adroitest bank thief, the most audacious tax-collector and holder-up that the road has seen since the palmy days of Joaquin Murieta and his merry men. I, in common with the rest of the slippery fraternity, long mourned him as defunct—cut off just in the prime of his glorious career—but it seems we wasted the briny, for the hero still lives to startle the world, to confound the honest and fill the pockets of the wicked—the last of whom we are a part of which! Gentlemen, my particular friend, Tiger Jim; know him."

"Delighted to make your acquaintance, gentlemen, I assure you," politely uttered Benedict with a low and comprehensive bow; "and particularly so at the present time and place, for, unless the gentle Jefferson yonder, has been indulging his propensity for drawing the long bow a trifle more than usual, we can be of good service to each other."

"No need to beat around the bush with them, Tiger," called out Archer. "They're true blood-bounds, and not easy scared by the prospect of red work, when they can scent good pay in the same quarter. Don't be mealy-mouthed, but out with it!"

Benedict gave no signs of having heard a syllable of this speech, but continued in the same smooth tones:

"Archer told me with what hopes you came to this spot, and how mysteriously your guide vanished, leaving you in the lurch. Suppose I am able to solve that mystery? Suppose I were to say that the fellow you know as Budd Painter stole away while you were soundly sleeping, with the express purpose of selling you out to the enemy?"

The five men interchanged uneasy, doubting glances, then looked toward their chief, who lazily nodded as he said:

"I'll back up anything the gentleman tells you, lads. You can believe him as implicitly as though the words fell from my own lips."

Benedict accepted this wholesale indorsement as a matter of course, without a change of countenance, and quietly added:

"Painter played his part with a skill and coolness that would have done credit to a more honest man. He struck an old trail that aroused his suspicions, and brought you here to lay by until he could confirm or dissipate his doubts. He left his mule and rifle with you for a double reason. If he failed to make the stroke he contemplated, that would bear him out in the excuses he would give to account for his leaving. If he succeeded, you would be kept here waiting for his return, and so fall an easy sacrifice to his cunning."

"Now I'll show you just what he was playing for. He told you the truth when he spoke of a bonanza lying in this region, and no doubt he meant fair play when you started. But he found out that another party had got in ahead of you, and were lapping up the cream so fast that by the time you could drive them out, if at all, there would be little left for you; so he made up his mind to save himself at your expense."

"He struck the other camp yesterday, and offered to furnish six stout, healthy slaves to work the mine, if he was insured a fair share in the proceeds. He swore he could do the trick easily enough, and turn the half dozen over without a shot being fired or a blow dealt."

The last words were drowned by the savage chorus of oaths and threats which burst from the five men, and if the Hard Man from 'Way Back had been within reach of their vengeance at that moment his shrift would have been very short.

Benedict waited patiently until the "wire-edge" was taken off their rage, then spoke rapidly.

"Luckily for you, gentlemen, the boss of the party to which Painter wanted to sell you as slaves suspected a trap in the proposition, and I knocked him over with a blue pill—"

"Say you killed the pizen cuss an' I, fer one, I'll work a year for you free o' all pay!" cried one of the men.

"I didn't kill him, because the thought struck me that the men he sought to betray would prefer dealing out his punishment to suit themselves."

"Then you knew who we was an' whar to find us?"

"Not exactly, though I felt pretty certain I

could find you if I wanted to do so. I thought the whole matter over last night, and here you have the result:

"I can give you a fair chance to get even with the man who tried to sell you for slaves, besides making a neat little stake for yourselves. Of course I expect to make more myself, but if you don't care to accept my proposition, say so outright, and I'll look elsewhere for my men."

"What size mought the stake be?"

"If you strictly obey orders I'll guarantee you each man one thousand dollars apiece, and possibly double that amount."

The men stared at him incredulously for a brief space, but then, as they saw that he was speaking in sober earnest, their hands were eagerly extended to close the bargain.

"Good enough!" Benedict exclaimed, his black eyes all aglow with a satanic joy. "You obey orders, and be sure I'll keep my part of the contract to the very letter."

"When shall we git to work, boss?" asked one of the rascals, adding with an apologetic laugh: "I hain't fingered a dollar fer so cussed long, that it makes my hooks eetch wuss than ef I'd bin handlin' p'izen ivy!"

"You will receive your orders through Archer. And now, if you please, get back to work. That jerked meat will come into good play, for there mustn't be any more powder burned until it is needed for two-legged game," added Benedict.

The men promptly obeyed, and the traitor turned to where Archer was reclining, and resumed his seat again.

"May I ask a question?"

"A dozen, if you like, my gentle Jefferson."

"Were you giving it straight to the boys about Budd Painter, or were you simply exercising your imagination?"

"A little truth, to leaven a great deal of lie," laughed Benedict, preparing a fresh pipeful of tobacco.

"Of course you had a reason; is it to remain a secret?"

"Not from my old pard. You see, Jeff, I expect to become a man of money very shortly, and as such it behoves me to take care of my precious health. Your Hard Man from 'Way Back blames me for his little misfortune, and swears to get even if he is ever given the ghost of a chance. As Tiger Jim, such a prospect would not trouble my dreams in the least, but as the future millionaire, I thought it wise to throw out an anchor or two to windward, in case the hot-blooded rascal should chance to escape from my little trap, either by his own wits, or through any feeling of fellowship among your men for one with whom they had chummed. You comprehend?"

Archer nodded assent.

"If he falls into their hands they'll flay him alive! If all of your schemes are as adroitly laid, I'd guarantee their complete success, for a trifling sum."

"Which is a polite hint for me to tell you all," laughed Benedict, in high good-humor, since all seemed working so admirably for his treacherous schemes.

"Without understanding the situation perfectly, how can I be expected to carry out your plans?" growled Archer.

"You should have been in full possession, long ago, only for the fact of my own ignorance," coolly retorted Benedict. "Until I met and sounded you and your men, I could form no plans; but they are rapidly taking shape in my brain now."

"In the first place we must make a clean sweep, leaving not one to tell the tale as it really happened. I think it would make all safer if we could arrange matters so as to cast suspicion on the red-skins, should the remains be discovered before the wolves clean them out of the way."

Archer hastily leaped to his feet, and passing over to where their luggage was stowed, soon returned with a couple of stout bows and a brace of quivers full of arrows.

"Maybe these tools will help you out. We had a little brush with a gang of reds one night, when they attempted to run off our stock, and rather got the best of them. I brought those along, more as trophies for future reference than from any idea they would ever come into play in these parts."

"Good enough!" exclaimed Benedict. "Cheyenne arrows! We are beyond their range, but it may be laid to a foraging band, or else to a trick of other reds, aiming to throw the odium from their own shoulders. It's frequently done, I know."

"There are nine men, not counting Budd Painter; all stout, gritty fellows, well armed and ready to use their tools if the necessity arises. They have two women and a lad with them, but that adds to their strength instead of weakness, for they are general favorites, and the boys would fight for either of them even quicker and fiercer than for their own lives. They are in a position not readily surprised and one easily defended. How do you like the prospect?" with a mocking laugh.

"It looks ugly," was the frank response, "but

if you say we can do it. I'm not one to hang back from the music."

"I do say it, and that, too, without firing a shot or dealing a blow, if my arrangements work as I expect they will."

Archer leaned forward, intense curiosity written in every line of his countenance, and then Clay Benedict rapidly, clearly unmasks his truly diabolical plan for compassing the ruin and death of his late friends.

Reckless, hard-hearted, blood-stained though his hands had been on more than one occasion, Jeff Archer turned a shade paler as he listened to the hissing speech of Tiger Jim, and he could not entirely repress a shudder as the traitor concluded and looked to him for applause.

"I'd rather meet the odds in a hand-to-hand grapple," the outlaw said, slowly, "but you know best, and I have agreed to follow your lead without questioning. Have it your own way. But I hope the stake is worth the work we have to do."

"Name your own figure, old fellow, and don't be modest."

"You hinted at ten thousand," hesitated Archer.

"Will double that still your confounded scruples?"

"Twenty thousand dollars?" exclaimed Archer, in amaze.

"You shall have that amount, the very hour my plans are successful—I pledge you my word as a rascal!"

"You'll never hear another whine from me, rest easy, old fellow! Now for your instructions: when shall we strike?"

"There is no particular hurry, since with the passage of each day, our pile of gold will grow larger. One week from to-night will be quite early enough, unless something unforeseen should occur to change my plans. If so, I'll bring word to this place. You spend each night here, or have a man in your place. The rest of you must lay close, and avoid being seen by the hunters who come out each day."

"I think I have said all that is necessary. Keep on the lookout for me, but avoid all others. Don't shoot or make more smoke than you can help. I'll turn face for the valley, now, and as I've lost so much time, I'll take the saddle and hindquarters of one of those deer with me."

Thus loaded, Clay Benedict left them and hastened back to his destined victims in the Golden Valley.

CHAPTER IX.

A BLOW FOR A BLOW.

VERY nearly two weeks had elapsed since the Hard Man from 'Way Back so disagreeably surprised the occupants of the Golden Valley by his brusque salutation from the crest of the rock wall, and during all that time, the gold-diggers have kept hard at their profitable labors, wasting not a moment they could spare from their meals through the day, foregoing even their grateful pipe after the mid-day meal, beginning their toil with the first faint glimmer of dawn, and knocking off work only when the light of the sun entirely failed them.

A feverish life, and one such as no set of men could endure for any great length of time without breaking down beneath the unnatural strain, but thus far the miners had required no urgings from their veteran commander. Reason told them that Budd Painter had not come to that lone region without company of some sort. Alone, afoot, armed only with knife and pistols, provided with no other tools or conveniences, bearing no traces of either hard travel or fighting, rosy and clearly well fed; that was a foregone conclusion.

He sullenly refused to enlighten them, and since that evening on which he warned Ralph Burnham against Clay Benedict as a snake in the grass, he had not opened his lips to speak a word to one of his captors. He ate, drank, smoked the occasional pipe which Bertha filled for him, acting on the secret orders of her father, who, as a last chance, hoped her grace and gentleness might soften the surly savage; but to all appearance, this was labor wasted in a hopeless cause.

Only when Clay Benedict passed before his limited range of vision, would the grim countenance of the tough citizen betray any emotion. Then his eyes would turn red and glow like those of a caged panther, while a sullen growl would rumble up from the depths of his massive chest as his teeth grinded and clicked together until the flakes of bloody foam spotted his shaggy beard. His athletic frame would quiver at brief intervals as violently as though suddenly afflicted with an ague-chill. At all other moments, he looked the dull, sullen savage, the stolid, insensible brute; but then he resembled more nearly a fiend who was famishing for a taste of human blood, all the more frightful because of his very helplessness and impotence.

At the close of each day the gold-diggers drew a long breath of relief, thankful that the expected enemy had not yet put in an appearance, but the dread still haunted their dreams, and formed their first waking thought in the gray dawn, for they dared not hope for another such respite.

A regular system of guard duty was arranged,

in addition to the watch which had always been kept over the dam and chute, but this, following their killing days of labor beneath the summer sun, proved too great a strain, and after a week had passed by without alarm, the practice was discontinued.

Each day a man took his turn as hunter, to procure fresh meat, and discover, if possible, whether there were any human beings prowling in the vicinity. Each night the report was the same, so far as the latter duty was concerned; not a living soul, not a trail had been noticed.

And so, with the passage of time, and as they saw the end of their toil drawing nearer as the quantity of gold-bearing gravel and sand yet to be washed grew less and less, the miners became more cheerful and less apprehensive. Only a few days longer, and then, let come who would, it mattered little. They had no fears of being able to defend the wealth they had won; their only fears had been of being driven away from the precious dust before they could secure it.

It was night, and Vernon Curtis was once more keeping a lonely watch over the safety of his sleeping friends in the Golden Valley which lay at his feet. Night, and almost an exact counterpart of that on which his dearest hopes were nipped in the bud by the strange discovery that the girl whom he loved in secret, but none the less ardently, was bound to another—had been a willing wife for nearly two years.

Warm and close, after a day through which the sun shone from a cloudless sky with a fervor which threatened to overpower the sturdy gold-diggers as they toiled in the muddy gravel and sands for the precious metal; with not a breath of air stirring through the little valley, and only an occasional ripple of wind coming across the little pond above the dam, only on that never-to-be-forgotten night the moon was at its full, flooding all below with its silver beams, while now naught save the twinkling stars relieved the gloom below.

Slowly the young miner went his rounds, stooping now and then to inspect the face of the dam, as fancy caused the dropping of water to sound louder than usual; but his duties were almost mechanically performed, for his brain was busied with far different thoughts.

Worn and weary in both body and mind, with all that he had endured through those trying days and nights, Vernon Curtis looked out upon the world through very different spectacles from those of the two brief weeks ago.

Then he was rapidly making money; a fact in which he rejoiced, not for itself alone, but because he saw in the not distant future a day when he would be in a position to avow the love which had been steadily growing stronger with the passage of each day since their journey was begun. His distant kinship would be no bar; rather the contrary, since he knew Ralph Burnham held that blood was nearer than water. Even if Bertha had not yet learned to love him in return—and sanguine though he was, he scarcely dared hope that—the time would come when his pure, whole-souled devotion must win its delightful reward.

Now—gold had lost its powers of pleasing; the whole earth seemed flat, stale and unprofitable; life was hardly worth living—because his day-star had been won by another.

Foolish, no doubt, but very natural under the circumstances, and though, should he live long enough, the young miner would forget all his moody repinings, partly born of bodily fatigue and mental anxiety, and discover that the world was a very good world, after all, and life well worth living, his present sufferings were none the less acute and hard to bear.

So black and bitter were his thoughts, that Vernon Curtis felt a thrill of grim pleasure as his attention was arrested by a suspicious sound not far distant—the slipping of a foot on a loose stone, which went rolling down the face of the steep below the dam.

A cat-like bound carried him close enough to note the dim, shadowy outline of a human being in a crouching position close to the end of the dam, and throwing forward the muzzle of his rifle to cover it, he cocked the weapon as he cried:

"Who goes there? Speak out and in a hurry, or I shoot!"

"Confound that stone!" muttered a voice, hastily adding in louder tones: "Don't waste your powder, Curtis!"

"It's you, Benedict?" quickly demanded the guard, still keeping his weapon in readiness for instant use.

"What the infernal heat has left of me—yes," was the prompt response, and Clay Benedict rose erect, limping as he advanced to meet the other. "I got smothered out, down yonder, and thought I'd come up here to find a fresh supply of breath, if there's any more than you need."

"It's free as air," with a laugh. "But you should have spoken a little sooner. My finger was on the trigger, and I came blessed nigh plugging you for one of those bugbears who have made our lives unhappy these two weeks."

"My foot slipped—confound that stone! I believe it's cracked by knee-pan! I intended hailing you as soon as I got fairly on top, but

my clumsiness, and your quick ears, saved me the trouble. So you took me for an enemy, did you?"

"Naturally, since I supposed you were all tired enough after work to be sound asleep, long ago, heat or no heat."

"Well, I couldn't sleep—hang it, man, why need you and I be so mealy-mouthed, after what has passed between us?" the traitor cried, with seeming frankness. "I'll wager my day's share that you were thinking of the same thing that broke my rest: of the pretty Bertha, and the strange discovery we made on that evening, up here."

Vernon Curtis started a little at this blunt speech, but for all that he was not greatly displeased to have the subject brought up, since another had broken the ice. Young, naturally of a confiding nature, his heart very sore, he longed to ease or dull its pain in some manner; why not by a free and open conversation with the one who he knew had been to the full as hard hit as himself?

"Come, don't be grumpy, old fellow," said Benedict, as they slowly walked side by side across the dam and up the bank opposite that on which was the chute. "I admit that I played a low-down part, that night, for I was pretty near crazy over the discovery I made; but I tried to make amends—"

"And succeeded," was the quick interruption, "at least, so far as I am concerned. I have forgotten it, and I hoped you had done the same."

"I was afraid you still held a grudge, you fight so shy of the subject, but since you say that's not the case—"

"I do say so, and mean it, too, Clay."

"Good! Give me your hand—so!" and the two men gripped each other's fingers with a fervor that seemed as sincere on the one side as it certainly was on the other.

"It was a curious affair," continued Benedict, speaking easily, almost flippantly, as they walked leisurely along. "Who could have imagined the little lady was a wife of two years standing? Not I, most assuredly, else I would have kept a tighter rein over my fancy."

"Her father was the one principally to blame," said Vernon, as Benedict ceased speaking. "He might have known what would be the consequences. How could a man avoid falling in love with her, thrown together every day, on a trip like this? And we taking it for granted that she was single all the time and therefore free to be wooed and won."

"Not I, surely," with a short laugh. "Though, come to think it over, I believe the trouble began before the journey, in my case, at least. When I first heard that Burnham was making his preparations for an overland trip to California, I had no more idea of taking such a jaunt than I had of flying, but a moment later, I was firmly convinced that my good health and prosperity demanded my presence in the Golden State.

"Like you, I thought of the long journey, during which we would be thrown into such close companionship, and no doubt you and I both arrived at the same conclusion; that there would be a mighty pleasant wedding come off not long after the end of our journey was reached. The only difference being in the face of the blessed bridegroom. And she—well, the face that rose before her eyes was neither yours nor mine!"

The light, mocking tone was abandoned, and for once in his life, Clay Benedict allowed his real emotions to gain the upper hand and show themselves without disguise. Hard, revengful, threatening was his voice, and Vernon Curtis shrank a little from his side.

Benedict noted this involuntary repulsion, and said:

"You and I are made of different stuff, old fellow. I believe you was bit quite as hard, but you have forgiven, if not forgotten. So have I—the lady; but I'm afraid her gallant husband and I will never pull well together, if ever we happen to meet. Who knows? He may drop off the books, some day, and thus reopen the race for the prize. If he does, my lad, it's you and I for it, and may the best man win!"

"I don't care to speculate over such a matter," said Curtis coldly, as they once more reached the dam, then turned off toward the chute. "Suppose we drop it for good and all?"

"You are too touchy, old fellow," with a hard, grim laugh. "Now it gives me positive pleasure, though of a rather queer sort, I admit, to tear open and thoroughly probe the wounds I receive. They heal over all the sooner, I find."

"Were I to brood over them, to nurse them in secret, I'd either go mad or else be driven to wash them out in blood!"

They paused beside the large rock, near which that brief, almost fatal encounter had taken place between them, and side by side they watched the water as it went tearing past, tossing, tumbling, beating itself into foam against the pointed rocks that rose above the surface, whirling here and there in fantastic eddies, but all the time hurrying on to take the plunge which carried it to the plain below and beyond.

"I'll carry a picture of this spot to the grave with me," said Benedict, his voice sounding strangely amid the roaring of the waters. "It was here that my eyes were opened to a full sense of my folly; here that I told my love, and had the brightest hopes man ever entertained dashed to ruins. And here it was I stood when you struck me, old fellow—the first time I ever received a blow from mortal being that I did not return with interest!"

"You know why it was struck," quietly replied Curtis. "I did not recognize you at the time, though, even if I had, I could have done no less under the circumstances. You yourself admitted as much."

"Of course; you were in the right, or I would have paid back that blow long ere this. But even granting that, it was a blow, and not so readily forgotten as forgiven."

"Come, let's go back. This spot only awakens disagreeable feelings. Why should we linger here? Come, old fellow."

"One moment. Look! That must be the rock my head struck against when you knocked me into the water. I never gave you credit for so much muscle, old friend. I went down before you like a log, without an effort to strike back. But I felt the blow, and even then, when death seemed inevitable, I swore to repay it—and now I keep that oath! Down, you dog—down!"

A knife flashed through the air, and was buried to the hilt in the bosom of the young miner.

CHAPTER X.

THE THUG AT WORK.

SWIFT as a flash of lightning fell the dastard blow, and equally swift was the deadly grip of the traitor's left hand as it shot out and clutched the unfortunate miner by the throat, choking off the sharp cry of mingled pain and horror.

A brief struggle, then the numbness of death stole over the victim and paralyzed his limbs beyond the power of offering further resistance. Back against the rock he was forced, that blood-stained hand still pressing upon the weapon, those steel-like fingers still gripping his throat until it seemed as though their tips must meet through flesh and bone. Into his death-filming eyes gleamed those murderous orbs, and in his ears hissed the devilishly-malignant voice:

"Blow for blow, you milk-and-water fool! If I let you run for a time, it was only to make my triumph more sure and complete. I found the mates of Budd Painter. I won them over, and even now they are in possession of the pocket and all of your friends. The gold is mine. They will die, even as you are dying—all save one! She—I will make her my bride, though a score of husbands claim precedence! While you—"

He ceased abruptly, for the first rays of the moon as it peeped above the rocks to the east, showed him that his bitter taunts fell upon heedless ears—that Vernon Curtis was dead or senseless—and with a savage jerk, he tore his weapon from its quivering sheath.

A jet of hot blood spurted from the ghastly wound and struck the assassin full in the face, but he only laughed in ferocious glee as he dropped the steel and gripped the body with both hands, holding it upright on the very edge of the chute for an instant. Then his right hand relaxed its grip, the strong muscles of his other arm keeping the senseless clay from falling.

Bick came his clinched fist, only to shoot forward and strike his helpless victim full in the face, the blow hurling the body out into the madly-rushing waters.

"Blow for blow, Vernon Curtis!" he snarled, leaning forward and watching the body as it was whirled away by the waters. "Even as I took the oath, just so have I kept it!"

One moment, then the body vanished from his straining gaze, and the assassin rose erect once more, a low, peculiar whistle coming from between his lips.

Almost immediately an answer came from among the rocks below, near the edge of the chute, and two dimly outlined forms scrambled up to where he stood awaiting them.

"Good!" he muttered. "You are on time."

"An' waitin' fer a good hour," grunted one of the men. "We hear you palaverin' up here so long, we begun to think thar was a powerful screw loose some'rs."

"The fool discovered me too soon, and I had to quiet his suspicions before I could strike. It makes no particular difference. There's time enough for all we have to do, and our game below will be all the more soundly sleeping."

"You have the cartridges ready prepared?"

"Jest as the boss give 'em to us. Whar do they go?"

"One beneath this rock," and Benedict tapped the boulder which bore the red sign of murder on its face. "It must be placed so as to throw the rock over into the chute, and dam back the water. This is the most particular part of your duty, so see that you make no mistakes. You will have plenty of time in which

to perfect your arrangements, before the signal is given to fire the fuse."

"Ef we make ary mistake, you kin keep back our share o' the plunder," said the rascal, with a confident grin. "Both Dick an' me was raised in the middle o' powder workin's, an' what we don't understand' about sech tricks, ain't hardly wuth knowin'."

Benedict led the way to the dam, and partly down the steep face, pausing and speaking in guarded tones:

"This is about the depth of the water in the pond above. You can judge for yourself where to place the powder, bearing in mind that the more completely the dam is destroyed, and the water set free in a mass, the more certainly will our work be accomplished."

"Cut the fuse for the cartridge beneath the rock by the chute, to burn two minutes, and make these in the face of the dam just half that length. Watch yonder point for a flash of light, then do your duty. You fully comprehend my meaning?"

"At the flash, we tetch off the fuse at the rock. We let it go nigh a minnit, by the watch, then set these off, so they'll speak out only a tick or two ahind the fust."

"Exac ly. Get all in readiness, and then watch for the signal flash at the point. If any person attempts to come up from the valley, and does not give the proper signal, use your knives, and mind there is no yelping done. Get to work now."

Clay Benedict paused only long enough to catch water in his hollowed palms sufficient to wash away the blood-stains from his face, then descended into the valley, bound on his mission of robbery and death.

Not a sound broke the stillness which reigned over the Golden Valley, save the distant roaring of the water in the race, and to all appearance, the miners were locked fast in slumber, wholly unconscious of the terrible fate which was so steadily, so surely drawing near to overwhelm them.

Straight to the tent of the Burnhams went the assassin, approaching from the rear, and kneeling with his ear pressed against the canvas. He could distinguish deep, regular breathing, and from the location, knew it proceeded from the hearty lungs of Ralph Burnham.

For a brief space he paused, as though meditating, then produced a handkerchief of dark hue, and bound it around his face so that his features were nearly hidden from sight, with the aid of his slouched hat.

Passing around the tent, he cautiously raised the door-flap, and entered, silently, softly, as ever a red-skin stole upon sleeping victim. Without a sound he crept over to where the veteran lay on a buffalo-robe, near the head of which the iron chest containing the golden treasure usually rested. But a hissing curse escaped the lips of the assassin as his hand came in contact only with the ground and the tent wall. The treasure-chest had been removed since last he inspected the interior, scarce three hours earlier in the evening.

Crouching low down, with hand upon knife, Benedict listened to learn if his involuntary curse had been heard, but the steady breathing continued without a break, and all else was still.

Still he did not move. The moon had not yet risen high enough to cast its rays into the Golden Valley, and all within the tent was black as pitch. He knew that Davy was sleeping with one of the miners, elsewhere, but that Bertha must be lying near. He knew where her couch was usually formed, but since the position of the treasure chest had been altered, he dare not trust to that fact in the intense gloom.

Silently raising to his knees, he took a dark-lantern from his bosom and moved the slide, flashing the bright light around the tent.

"What the devil is that? Who's thar?" demanded a startled voice, and Clay Benedict knew that Ralph Burnham had been awakened by the sudden inflow of light.

As the lantern cast the glow away from him, he knew that the light had not touched his own face, and with swift presence of mind he brushed the masking handkerchief down so it hung around his neck, at the same time turning the light upon the bewildered, half-asleep miner, muttering guardedly:

"It's me, old friend—Benedict. Hist! not a sound! Don't waken Bertha, but steal out, and I'll tell you what's the matter."

He shut off the light and stole out of the tent, pausing beside the entrance to exchange his lantern for a knife—still red with the heart's blood of poor Vernon Curtis.

His first impulse was to drive the weapon to the heart of the miner when he came outside, trusting to his skill with the weapon and his great strength to stifle all outcry, and if Ralph Burnham had followed at once, such would in all probability have been the course followed by the assassin. But the veteran paused to draw on his boots, and in that brief space the fertile brain of the Thug saw a more plausible manner of escaping the consequences of his false step, and when Ralph Burnham emerged from the tent he touched him on the arm and whispered softly:

"Follow me closely. There's no need of alarming the camp just at present. You and I will be enough for now."

"What's up?" muttered the old miner, anxiously, but the cunning traitor only gripped his arm more tightly, as a signal for utter silence, as he led the way toward the foot of the dam, only pausing when confident that no ear among the miners could overhear them.

"Be cautious!" he muttered, with his lips close to the ear of the man whom he had so ruthlessly doomed to death. "I have brought you out here, because I knew you would never believe the black truth without being an eyewitness of the whole affair. You shall see the traitor, and hear him condemn himself beyond all possibility of lying out of it."

"What traitor? What in thunder is you tryin' to git through ye, anyhow, boy? You don't smell drunk, but durned ef you ain't talkin' mighty loose fer a sober man!" exclaimed the veteran, impatience in his tones.

"Your pet, Vernon Curtis!" hissed the traitor, malignantly.

The veteran turned upon him with a sharp exclamation.

"Look out, young man, what you say. I'd a monstrous sight sooner think you a traitor than Vern!"

"Don't I know that?" sharply retorted Benedict, casting a quick glance around them to make sure they were alone. "I have suspected Curtis ever since the night Bertha told us of her marriage, but I said nothing, for I hoped for better things, even against my own judgment."

"It was so hot to-night that I couldn't sleep, so I thought I'd go up on the dam, in hopes of getting a little more air. I caught the sound of voices, and that awakened my suspicions anew, for I knew that Curtis was doing guard duty to-night. I stole closer, and—Look yonder!"

With his left hand, the traitor grasped Ralph Burnham by the arm, and forced him to face the dam.

"What? I cain't see nothin'! Whar is it?" whispered the veteran, bending forward, in his excitement not noticing how quickly Benedict drew back his pointing hand to snatch a revolver from his belt.

"Here, curse you!" came gratingly from his lips, as he brought the heavy, brass-bound butt of the pistol down upon the stooping head, with all the power of his strong right arm.

Without a sound or groan, the stricken man fell forward upon his face, his strong limbs quivering slightly, but that was the only token of remaining life.

Panther-like in his activity, Clay Benedict leaped upon the fallen man, gripping his throat with both hands, to stifle any cry for help, should his blow not prove effectual; but there was no resistance, and he gradually relaxed his savage grip, feeling of the skull where the weapon had struck.

"You won't make any further trouble, anyhow!" he muttered, with a low, ugly laugh, as he felt the bones give way beneath the pressure of his finger-tips. "Now for the key to the chest. I've lost too much time already. Gentle Jeff will begin to think I have fallen asleep, unless I make haste."

Turning the body upon its back, the Thug searched in the pockets for the key, a little snarl of pleasure escaping his lips as his quest proved successful.

"I began to think the old scoundrel had come the hocus-pocus over us all, but I reckon the chest is somewhere else in the tent, after all," the murderer muttered to himself, as he secured the key, then dragged the body aside from the trail usually followed by any one passing from the camp to the dam.

Swiftly but silently he glided back to the camp, pausing for a moment at his own sleeping place to secure a few small articles which he stowed away on his person, then passing over to the Burnham tent. Again he listened with his ear close to the canvas, creeping slowly around the structure until he at length located the spot where poor Bertha was sleeping.

Once more he bound the disguising handkerchief over his face, and crept around and into the tent.

Facing the point where his keen hearing had located the sleeping beauty, the Thug gradually moved the slide of his dark-lantern, letting on the light by degrees, and thus avoiding the sudden shock which had awakened Ralph Burnham, only a few minutes earlier in the night.

Slowly the sheet of light stole around until it fell fairly across the figure of the soundly sleeping woman, and stoutly though he had steeled his nerves, Clay Benedict drew in his breath with a quick gasp that seemed like the blade of a knife cutting through his heart.

For never before had the young wife looked to him as entrancingly lovely as she did now, sleeping soundly, dreamlessly, ignorant of the tragic scenes which were occurring, with no friendly spirit to warn her of the frightful peril which threatened her in her helplessness.

With eyes that glowed and glittered like those of some unholy demon, the Thug gloated over the sleeping beauty, his breath coming hot and fast, his limbs trembling until the sheet

of light danced fitfully over the wall of the tent.

A low moan escaped the lips of the sleeping beauty, and her fair arms began to move uneasily, as though that gloating gaze was troubling her, and with a desperate effort, Clay Benedict overcame the spell which had held him entranced, and drawing a carefully prepared pitch plaster from his pocket, he crept within arm's length of her couch, and the next moment the poor girl gave a convulsive start and attempt to shriek out—but her lips were sealed by the plaster, held firmly in place by the strong hand of the Thug.

Placing the lantern on the ground at arm's-length, Benedict flashed forth his knife, and in a hoarse, disguised voice, he grated:

"Not a word, ye pizen cat! If you kick an' thrash aroun' tell you roust out the others, durned ef I don't slit your wizzand from year to year! Simmer down an' take it cool, an' you shain't be hurt a single ha'r o' your purty head."

The terror-filled eyes sought to gain confirmation of this assurance by scanning the face of the intruder, but in vain. Not trusting wholly to the masking kerchief, the Thug kept his countenance turned away from the light.

"Come, gal, unless you want to take a little jaunt jest as ye be, git up an' putt on your day duds. But mind ye, now, no tricks on travelers. I won't hurt ye, long's you act quiet, but the fust step you make to git away, I'll kerry you to death, jest as sudden an'sartin as though a thunderbolt hed slipped down your gullet afore it bu'sted wide open—now mind."

Trembling, unnerved, fearing the worst, poor Bertha obeyed to the best of her ability, aided in donning her garments by the assassin, one of whose hands hovered close to her lips, to guard against her tearing off the plaster and giving the alarm to the sleeping gold-diggers.

"Good enough so fur," added the disguised voice. "But, come to think, I reckon I'd ruther kerry you in my arms, then to take the chancies o' you givin' me the dirty shake in the dark. Take it cool an' easy, young'un. The less kickin' an' squamblin' ye do, the sooner it'll be over," he muttered, as he bound her hands tightly behind her back, then forced her back on the couch, to secure her ankles after the same fashion.

In redoubled terror, poor Bertha struggled desperately, until her overtired brain gave way, and with a convulsive shudder, she lay insensible. For an instant a chilling fear checked the heart of the assassin, but then as he saw she had merely fainted, he nodded grimly, muttering below his breath:

"So much the better, for now she'll behave quietly."

Shutting off the light and stowing away the lantern, Clay Benedict lifted the woman in his strong arms and stole out of the tent, through the camp, and up one of the rocky trails.

"Hellow, old fellow!" came a low voice, "how goes it all?" and a phantom-like form suddenly arose to bar his way.

CHAPTER XI.

THE FINAL CATASTROPHE.

"THAT you, Jeff?" demanded Benedict, leaping back a pace and drawing a pistol as he spoke.

"Certain—who else?" came the swift response. "But you've been an infernal long time coming. I was just about taking a scout down yonder, to see if you hadn't overslept yourself, or been smoked by the diggers and put in limbo."

"I've had the deuce of a time, through no fault of mine, though," said the Thug, with a short, grim laugh. "There's two less for the water to handle, at any rate."

"You rubbed them out?"

"Slick as a whistle! The young sprout on guard over the dam, and the boss himself. I'd rather have let out the last job, for it's not so agreeable, knocking one's prospective daddy-in-law in the head; but it had to be done."

"And this is the girl you've spouted so much about?" the outlaw asked, curiously peering into the deathlike countenance, as it lay against the shoulder of the assassin. "A trim enough looking piece, but is it worth all the trouble you—"

"Never you mind, Gentle Jeff," gruffly interrupted Benedict. "The trouble is mine, not yours, and if I choose to run the risk, no one in this outfit has any right to object."

"Oh, I'm not kicking on my own account," was the careless retort. "I'll take precious good care to keep out of range of her peepers, when they open again, so she can't connect me with this night's work. But you; how will you account to her—"

"That, too, is my lookout, and need not trouble you in the least, old fellow. Don't be so curious," and Benedict carried his unconscious burden further up the rocks, at length lowering her to the ground in a secluded spot between two rocks.

"Have you placed your men in position?"

"Long ago. There are two acting on the dam, and a couple more watching at the lower end, one on each side, while the other is over at the opposite pass. You and I will guard this one."

The lads are made up as Indians, and will do their work up in good style, never fear."

"If the two fellows over yonder don't blunder with their cartridges, there'll be little work for any of us to do, once the water breaks loose, except to wait our chance and slip a few of your Cheyenne arrows into cold meat," added the Thug, with a hard, cruel laugh.

"But come to work. The chest is there all right, but we must make it safe before the signal to break down the dam is given. Follow close, and mind your footing."

"I'm stepping on sleeping rattlers—pull out!"

Clay Benedict led the way down the winding pass, into the Golden Valley, his bootless feet giving out not the slightest sound, and as he drew near the camp he paused to listen.

All was still. The doomed gold-diggers slept heavily after their laborious toil. Not a sound could be heard save the roaring of the waters in the chute above the dam.

Touching Archer on the shoulder, Benedict glided on, entering the tent where the treasure-chest awaited them.

Dropping the door-flap after entering, he turned the slide of his lantern partly on, and directed the ray of yellow light upon the iron chest.

Archer glided forward, and catching hold of one handle, tested its weight, but found that his greatest efforts could barely lift the one end, and turning his head toward his partner in crime, he shook it negatively.

"I told you as much," muttered Benedict, taking the key which he had found on the person of the luckless veteran from his pocket, and kneeling in front of the chest. "We will have to take out a part of the dust, and stow it safely away, then come back for the remainder. I'm not sorry, for the boys might feel like kicking for higher wages, were they to see the whole amount before the divide."

"Not a kick," replied Archer, in the same guarded tones. "They're too well trained for that. Let me lift my finger, and they'll crouch like whipped curs at my feet."

"You've never tempted them with sight of a prize like this," said Benedict, turning the key and opening the chest, revealing many stout buckskin and canvas bags, filled full, and neatly tied up, with the weight of each sack marked upon it with red chalk.

The nuggets and coarsest flakes of gold were packed in the canvas sacks, for fine dust would be more apt to sift through these and be wasted.

Archer stared in open-mouthed amazement as Benedict lifted out sack after sack from the chest, for sanguine as the story told by the mountain spring by Clay Benedict had made him, his wildest fancies had never included a strike to equal this. And even in that moment he began to be dissatisfied with the amount promised him for his aid, munificent as he had until now thought it.

Clay Benedict apparently suspected something of this, for he turned abruptly toward his covetous mate, muttering:

"Business is business, old fellow, and a bargain is a bargain. You named your price, and I doubled it without asking."

"I'm not kicking," muttered the outlaw, sulkily. "But it's a monstrous big stake for one man to tumble into!"

"I helped to dig it; but never mind that. I have only one word to say. If you try to play double on me, I'll kill you, though you were ten times my pard! If you live up to your word, and see me safe through the job, I'll show you a still richer strike—ay! one beside which this is only a flea-bite! Take your choice, and be quick about it, too!"

"I'm your pard, as you say, and of course I'll play fair; I never dreamed of doing aught else."

"I saw the devil sticking out of your eyes, though, old fellow," grimly retorted Benedict, still doubting.

"That marvelous pile of gold dazzled me for a moment, I admit that," frankly. "But I never once thought of playing you false. If you think so, keep back the amount you promised me, until you are fully satisfied I am square."

"That's hearty!" and the Thug caught the outlaw by the hand with a warm grip. "I know my old mate, now, and I repeat, you'll never have cause to regret your sticking by your word, for I've made another strike that lays 'way over this, and when the right time comes, we'll go into it for all it's worth."

"As equal partners?"

"As equal partners, of course," was the prompt reply.

No more was said, but when two-thirds of the number of gold-sacks were taken from the chest, it was reclosed and locked, while the two men shut off the light of the lantern and loaded themselves down with the precious metal, staggering silently out of the tent, across the level bed of the one time lake, and then scaling the crooked trail, being forced to pause more than once in order to rest their heavily tasked muscles.

"If we play our cards right, not one of the boys need even suspect that we found more gold in the chest than is in it at this

moment," said Benedict, as they reached the crest of the hill, and dropped their precious burden. "They may be everything you say, but for my part, I'll be more at ease if the temptation to knock us both on the head is lessened, just this much."

"As you please," returned Archer, brushing the sweat-drops from his heated brow. "I have all confidence in my influence over them, but if it will make you feel any easier, take your own way. If I can aid you, all that's needed is for you to say how and in what manner."

"We'll cache these bags here, covering them over with stones and gravel. When the rest is divided, we'll watch our chances, and prepare this for transportation unsuspected. It can be done, I reckon."

"Easily enough. I'll keep the lads from watching too close, and there are pack-mules enough, if we leave some of our tools behind."

"You play your part well and you'll never regret it, old pard," said Benedict, earnestly.

"That new strike—you're sure there's no mistake about it being a bonanza? Where is it, and how did you find out?" curiously asked Archer, his eyes aglow with covetousness.

"Time enough to talk about that when this job is done," shortly replied the Thug, who had no idea of prematurely disclosing his precious secret.

Partners though they had been in many a wild deed and tragic scene in the days gone by, there was little faith or confidence between the two scoundrels. Either would have betrayed the other without a moment's hesitation, had the temptation been powerful enough to overshadow the risk, and knowing this, Clay Benedict had hinted at his golden secret, feeling that without some such security, he would be murdered by his mate with as little compunction as he, himself, had shown the men with whom he had lived on such terms of intimacy and good fellowship.

Archer gave a dissatisfied growl, but dare not press his questions further, just then, and sulkily followed the example of his fellow criminal in covering up the sacks of gold.

"That will serve for the present," said Benedict when the gold was hidden. "No danger of my forgetting either the spot or the number of sacks. If I should, no doubt you can freshen my memory, Jeff."

"You talk as though you thought I meant to sneak back and steal some of them," growled Archer, indignantly.

"Clumsier tricks than that have been attempted, pard!" laughed the Thug. "I don't think you would attempt any such gouge game, but all the same it won't do any harm to bear in mind this much: I'll kill the man that attempts to rob me, pard or no pard! Deal square with me, and I'll make your fortune. I'll fill your pockets so full that you can throw away the ducats with both hands, from morn till eve. But it must be a perfectly square deal between us two, or all you'll get will be a grave—if the coyotes and buzzards don't bury you instead!"

"Look here!" and Archer sternly confronted him, with eyes aglow and hand on weapon. "You've said enough on that score. Drop it, or by the heaven above us, I'll give you cause for something more serious than snarling! The man who hints that I'm not perfectly square lies like a cowardly cur!"

"And I'm not that man," said Benedict, with a sudden and complete change of tone. "I've gone through with so much, in these last few days, that my brain is whirling like a top. I didn't mean any offense, old pard. Shake, and forget it all."

Their hands met in a grip that was close and firm enough to all outward seeming, but neither man was deceived. They knew how little faith existed between them, and how frail was the bond that held them together in outward amity.

"That's hearty, pard. Now let's finish our work down yonder, for I'm anxious to see the circus performed. If those two rascals only perform their duty well!"

"If they make a botch it will be the first since I knew them," was the confident response, and then, in perfect silence the two villains descended the winding trail, and stole cautiously toward the tent where the chest awaited them.

Still the doomed miners slept the sleep of the weary. Still the monotonous roar of the waters floated over the little valley, so soon to become as it was before the ingenious hand of man altered its features.

Their bootless feet giving forth no echoes on the dry sand and gravel, the two outlaws carried the iron chest out of the tent and across to the trail, up which they slowly labored until near the spot where the other gold was hidden.

"Good enough so far!" muttered Benedict, drawing a long breath. "Even if those fools down yonder should wake up, we will still be ahead of the game. We've got the gold, and I have the girl. It's almost a pity they should be wiped out without knowing how cunningly they have been outwitted!"

"I believe you're going crazy, man!" impa-

tiently growled Archer, cutting his wildly exultant speech short. "The boys will grow tired of waiting if you waste any more time. Give the signal, and let the show end!"

"Time enough," more coolly returned Benedict. "We'll take a run around and make sure the boys are on guard and in readiness to do their part. It won't take long; come!"

Together they passed along to the mouth of the little valley, where they found two men dressed as red-skins, impatiently wondering what caused the delay.

"It will come now," said Benedict. "Hold yourself in readiness to shoot down any and all persons who may try to escape by this pass. None will come alive, if the dam bursts all at once, but our plans there may hang fire, and the warning can do you no harm."

They passed on to the other trail, the sole remaining one by means of which the valley could be left, and the Thug repeated his warning. Then the two men descended into the valley, crossing it without raising an alarm, and soon regained their chosen position from which the signal flash was to be given.

Benedict drew aside the slide of his dark lantern, and sent a stream of light over the valley, holding it thus until he caught sight of a brief flash in answer from the top of the dam.

"In two minutes!" he muttered, turning the light of the lantern upon his open watch. "Wake up, ye poor devils, or forever after hold your peace!"

Swiftly the seconds stole along. Not a sound from the valley where the doomed miners were peacefully sleeping.

"They're lighting the fuses below the dam!" said Archer.

"Prompt, to a second!" laughed Benedict, closing his watch and shutting off the light. "Now for the end of creation!"

It came. A loud explosion—a barely perceptible pause, two others that sounded as one—then the dam gave way, and with a frightful roar the waters flooded the valley!"

PART II.

CHAPTER I.

THE PAINTER BARES HIS FANGS.

"YOU'RE the big shooter right from Shooterville, an' you kin go off at hafe-cock, jest as easy as though your snapper was pulled back to the double click. You make a livin' by sellin' the skeeps you take, to stuff feather-beds with, an' you run a dozen hash-factories with the noses an' years you chaw off'm sech onfortinit cusses as happens to wink when you look at 'em crossways! That's the kind o' cockle-bur you be. An' I leaves it to the crowd ef his looks don't show it?"

Harsh and disagreeable the voice, but in answer there came a chorus of affirmative laughs and exclamations, while one fellow yelled out:

"Ware hawk, old feller! The Man Chawer from 'way up Bitter Crick is raspin' his teeth with his tongue, an' fixin' his two eyes onto them fly-flopers o' yourn like he wanted a squar' meal! Curry him down smooth an' easy, or you're jest nat'ally gone—mind, I tell ye!"

The interior of a rough-and-ready saloon, in a "red-hot" mining-camp, in the early portion of the evening.

Smoky oil lamps were burning behind the rude bar, where stood a number of dingy bottles, still more dubious-looking tumblers, thick enough at the bottom and heavy enough to serve as most dangerous missiles in a drunken row, capable of breaking a skull without injury to themselves.

Other lamps stuck in brackets screwed or nailed to the walls, while still others ornamented a rude wooden cross, hanging horizontally from the rafted ceiling in the center of the room, serving as a chandelier.

Behind the bar stood a burly, black-browed ruffian, leaning his massive, bare arms upon the counter; grinning broadly in recognition of his own wit—for from his hair-shaded lips came the speech last recorded.

A dozen or more rough-looking men occupied the room, some seated at tables made from slabs, others lounging on foot, but the eyes of all turned upon two men who stood near the center of the room.

One was tall, loose-jointed, awkward in movements, ragged and dirty in garb, while the weapons which hung from the belt which girded his waist, were battered and rusty. His face was thin and almost ludicrous in its ugliness. His nose was of enormous dimensions, bulbous at the end, and fairly blazing with carbuncles and rum-blossoms.

Just now his homely features were distorted by a pitiful grin, one-third flattery, two-thirds terror.

The other man was of a far different appearance. Standing about the medium height of mankind, his shoulders were broad, without being clumsy; his chest full, his waist round and muscular; his actions quick and lithe as those of a cat, though it was plain enough that, early as

was the night, he had a full cargo of bad whisky aboard.

In soberness, his face would have seemed handsome, his eyes clear and intelligent. His garb was that of a miner, but the material of which it was constructed, was finer than customary, and marked him as a sort of dandy among his fellows.

In his right hand, he held a revolver, ivory handled and nickel-plated, the barrel of which he was rubbing up and down against the side of the other man's face, occasionally varying the programme by saluting the richly-colored nose.

"Don't I know him?" chuckled the man last described, with a rub of the pistol-barrel that drew a groan of pain from the trembling lips of his victim. "Ain't he Fightin' Dandy from Slaughterville? Don't he diet on raw beef an' baby fingers? Ain't he unhappy when a day passes by that don't add a notch to his death-tally? Ain't he jest b'ilin' over with pure, assnick mad, right now? An' wouldn't he open his cave an' slick me down his fodder-hole, without greasin', only he knows I'm a pore, helpless, lone orphan, the only support o' a widdered mother an' a crippled dad? Course he jest would!"

"Ain't he lively, gents?" whined the poor devil, trying to hide his pain and terror behind an appeasing grin. "Chuck full o' fun—playful as a kitten—ouch!"

A savage rake of the octagon barrel drew blood from the tingling ear, and as the cowering wretch flung up one hand to shield the member, the reddened muzzle was thrust into his face, while the ruffian cried:

"So mad he is, his breath 'ull pi'zen a rattler. An' at me, which is a cripple an' cain't run away from a box-turtle, Au' you pesky critters grinnin' thar like a bump on a log, lettin' him crow over me, an' crowd me into a fight. Won't ye let up, ye ontamed man-eater! Cain't I coax ye to take a drink an' let me off this time—j-st once?"

"Lord! sech a flow of sperrets—sech a playful gent as he is, with a tongue like a brass band, an' soft as a woman!" gasped the bummer, shrinking back as the pistol-muzzle was thrust against his poor nose. "Come, let's all hev a wet, an' call it squar'. Pard, trot 'em out, an' charge it to me!"

He turned an imploring look toward the ruffianly barkeeper, but that worthy grinned meaningly as he extended his hand, twirling his stumpy fingers.

"When I see the squivalent, ole knocker-out. Slates's all bu'sted, an' only dust calls at this bar!"

The trembling wretch went down into his pocket as though confident a gold mine existed there, but then a blank look came into his face, and he strove to laugh.

"Durn my fergitful soul! I come away from hum an' left my weasel-skin on the pianny in the parlor! 'Scuse me for a minnit, gents, an' I'll run back a'fter it. So long!"

"Wait a bit, my dandy!" cried the ruffian, dexterously catchin' him by the nose, twisting that member with a force that drew tears from the bleared eyes, and wrung a cry of pain from its owner. "Ef ye crowd a worm too hard, it'll turn an' try to git even, the best it knows how. I'm a peaceable man—the boys kin all tell ye as much, ef ye ax 'em. But fer all that I cain't let a man spit in my face an' try to rub it in.

"You bin crowdin' me this last hafe-hour, an' I stud an' tuck it all like a angel, fer I known you could chaw me all up to hoss feed, an' not hafe try, when once you got to goin'. I was willin' to take that, but you cain't add insult to injury without layin' me in ship-shape fashion for the crowner. You axed us to drink; trot it out, or fight!"

"I'm dead broke, an' he won't trust me wuth a cent," whined the poor wretch. "Don't—take it away—I cain't fight—I'm a coward clean through—for the love o' Heaven, somebody take him off!"

It was a soul-sickening, pitiable sight, to behold the bummer, trying to dodge the pistol which was rubbing first one ear and then the other, until the blood streamed down his neck—yet those ruffians laughed and shouted in glee, hugely enjoying the scene of brutality and misery.

So wholly absorbed were they that not one among them all noticed the frail door spring open, or was aware of the entrance of a man whose eyes flashed with a sudden fire as he caught sight of the profile of the mocking, threatening ruffian.

Only an instant did he pause, then, with a panther-like bound, he reached the side of the villain, and grasping the extended arm close to the hand, jerked it back with terrible force, in such a manner that the hammer and barrel of the pistol were dashed full in the face of the owner, hurling him backward to the floor bleeding and senseless.

A fierce yell broke from the lips of the newcomer, and a brace of revolvers filled his hands as one foot was planted heavily upon the chest of the fallen ruffian.

"Budd Painter's my name, an' I'm painter by natur'! I'm A Hard Man from 'Way Back,

a thousan' miles the other side o' all civilization! I kin lick a bully, an' chaw up all his 'lations! Ef ye don't think it, step out you—one, two, or bull outfit in a lump—it don't make a diff o' bittance to me!"

When the sudden assault was made and their bullying comrade went down like a log before that terrible blow from his own weapon, more than one of those present dropped their hands to their weapons, with scowls and oaths of anger; but when the bold fellow uttered his name, a startling change came over them, and they shrunk back as though from a plague.

A mocking laugh parted the heavily-bearded lips.

"Cowed! by the 'tarnal! An' only one man afore ye! Bold cusses you be! Torturin' a pore, crack-brained coward, an' thinkin' it heaps o' fun; but when you see the face of a man, straight-haired an' chuck-full o' grit, ye wilt like a dung-hill cock at the fu'st tetch o' the gaffs!"

"Who in blazes is you, kickin' up a row in my place?" demanded the burly barkeeper, jerking out a revolver.

"A man, ye dirty p'izen-slinger!" grated the tough citizen as he leaped swiftly aside and pulled trigger while in the air. "A Hard Man from 'Way Back, durn ye!"

The two reports were almost simultaneous, but the lead intended for the heart of the tough citizen tore harmlessly between his side and arm, striking one of the crowd in the leg and snapping the bone, bringing him to the floor with a wild yell of agony.

A howling curse came from the saloon-keeper's lips, as his pistol was knocked back against the bottles, and blood flew in crimson spray from his shattered fingers as he gave his hand an involuntary shake.

Budd Painter reached the side wall in that mighty leap, whirling swiftly around and covering the excited crowd with his pistols. Sharp and clear his voice rung out:

"Who's the next man that wants to be sent home happy? Don't be bashful! Ax fer what ye want, ef you don't see it on the counter! The boss is in, an' it's his business to wait on customers! Painter by name an' painter by natur'—that's me!"

"I never stick my paw into another man's pie, but when I smell a row goin' on, I got to lev a piece or bu'st. Them that wants to trade, but who's too bashful to speak out in a crowd, kin wink ef they'd ruther. I kerry a graveyard in each hand, an' burial permits in each chamber. Holes dug to order, an' warranted to give parfext satisfaction or no trade. No objections to layin' out corposse; in fact, I ruther like it."

The roughs shrunk back as though this bold, whimsically worded challenge had taken all the starch out of their backbones. Fear was upon every face, and many were the yearning glances cast stealthily toward the door. As one man they would have made a break for the outer air, only they feared to make the first move, lest the wild bravo should take it as a signal to open his battery on them.

Hardly a man present but what had heard of the tough citizen, whose many wild and desperate exploits in the rougher mining-camps had been greatly exaggerated in the re-telling, until his very name was sufficient to paralyze the courage of any common man.

"Not a wink nur a sign!" exclaimed the Hard Man from 'Way Back, his eyes widely staring in mock amazement. "An' I was told to strike this burg ef I wanted the red-hottest sort o' fun. Whar they swore one hafe o' the citz killed the other hafe fer breakfast, an' t' n' blowed thar own brains out beca'se thar wasn't nothin' left over fer dinner, an' they was skeered o' starvin' to death! Yit a dozen o' you big fellers knuckle down afore one man—an' he a teeny little runt that bain't got his lips fairly dry o' his mammy's milk!"

A groan came from the lips of the bully, as he feebly struggled to a sitting posture, facing the tough citizen. A dazed, bewildered look filled his eyes, as he wiped away the blood, and then a wild howl burst from his lips, as the trembling bummer, all his terrors awakened, made a dive for the saloon door.

"He bit me!" grated the bully, staggering to his feet, and fumbling for a pistol, in his bewilderment trying to find one in the empty scabbard. "I'll chaw him up!"

A startling change had come over the mocking face of Budd Painter at the first sound of that hoarse voice, and as the bully staggered to his feet, he leaned forward, his eyes glaring with a red glow, his hard features strangely working, seemingly oblivious to all else.

Then, with a wild-beast-like snarl, he strode forward, and tore the belt of weapons from the waist of the bully, flinging them on the floor behind him. He caught the astonished rough by the shoulders, and stared him full in the face.

"What the devil—who're you?" savagely demanded the ruffian, shrinking back from that fixed, savage glare.

"I know your voice—I know your face!" growled Painter, in hoarse, barely articulate tones. "I kin almost speak your name. It

trimbles onto the tip o' my tongue, but thar it sticks, an' I cain't spit it out. Tell me—tell me, afore I shake seventeen kinds o' stuffin' out o' ye! Who be ye, anyhow?"

The bummer stuck his head around the edge of the door, and in a high, cracked voice called out:

"It's Dick Damper, the durndest devil this side o' Tophet!"

The instant the words escaped his lips, he ducked his head back, and took to his heels, like one anticipating instant pursuit, and consequent annihilation for his boldness.

But no one followed him. Not even a glance was turned toward the door, for matters of far greater interest enthralled the attention of all within the saloon.

"I know ye now!" grated the Hard Man from 'Way Back, as his grasp tightened. "I know ye now, an' I know what—I did know, but somehow it's 'scaped me ag'in! Durn ye, down ye go!"

As the first words left his lips, Budd Painter tightened his fierce grip, and with a mighty effort fairly raised the bewildered bully from the floor, feet uppermost, then swiftly shifting the grasp of one hand to a leg, he held him above his head with the grip of a giant, despite his wild kicking and efforts to escape.

A gasping breath escaped the crowd as they involuntarily shrunk back, for they expected to see their mate dashed to the floor by the tough citizen, and killed or crippled by the fearful shock.

But a puzzled look came into those glowing eyes, dimming their insane light, and instead of carrying out his evident purpose when first lifting the bully, Painter set him on his feet once more.

Trembling, dizzy, unmanned for the moment, Dick Damper staggered back until supported by the bar.

The Hard Man from 'Way Back stared at him with painful intentness, brushing one hand across his temples, as though trying to clear away a perplexing mist, unheeding the men who came crowding into the saloon, attracted by the sound of pistol-shots, eager to witness the "circus."

"It's in here," muttered the Hercules, tapping his scarred brow with the muzzle of a revolver until the skin reddened beneath the contact. "I kin 'most spit it out. Dick Damper—it's the name. I know that much. I know that Dick Damper is one o' the men I'm huntin' fer—but why? What he's he done? Curse ye, dog-pizen imp—hell-bound—spawn o' the devil!" he snarled, his eyes glittering like living coals of fire as he confronted the bully, who was gradually recovering his usual nerve as his brain recovered more and more from the shock of that terrible blow. "Tell me whar I met ye in the days gone by! Tell me what devil's trick you played onto me when I couldn't strike back! Spit it out, or sure's my name is Budd Painter, I'll make a lead mine o' your karkidge!"

Dick Damper started at the sound of that name, for until now he had been too utterly confused to recognize it. A pale shade crept over his bloody face, and a hunted look came into his eyes; but only for a moment. Then his natural boldness was recovered, and he called out in an injured tone:

"I ain't heeled. Somebody knocked me down from ahind, an' tuck away my tools when I couln't help myself. I don't know ye from a hole in the ground; but ef you're a man, an' think you've got any cause o' grudge ag'inst me, let me hev my pops back ag'in an' I'll fight ye, when, whar an' how you like! Kin I say any fairer, gents?" with an appealing glance toward the new-comers.

"Fair play's a jewel, all the world over!" cried one of their number, taking a step forward and addressing Budd Painter. "Come, my good fellow; you look like a square man. You wouldn't shoot down a poor devil without giving him a chance to defend himself? That would be a cowardly act, besides calling for a dose of lynch law."

More suitable words could not have been extracted from between the covers of a dictionary. The cloud vanished from the face of the Hard Man from 'Way Back, and instead came a smile, while his voice sounded fairly cheerful, as he replied:

"Budd Painter don't ax no odds of mortal man, an' I'd fight the devil on an even footin', ef so be be axed it like a gentleman. Only—ef I could only git it through my head when an' whar that cuss injured me—fer I know he did throw dirt when I couldn't help myself—but whar an' how?"

The wild, puzzled look came back to his eyes, but again vanished, as the man who had first spoken tapped him on the shoulder in a friendly manner, laughing lightly:

"Fight first and ask questions afterward, is the motto in Death-Trap Diggings, my dear sir. Of course you will give Dick Damper the chance he asks?"

"Fight—him?" with a savage glare at the bally, who was buckling the belt of weapons, banded him by a mate, around his waist once more. "Yes, I'd fight him ef he was a thousan'. But I'd like to know—"

"So we all would, my dear fellow," soothingly interposed the other. "Time enough for that later, if you don't get killed; for Dick is the devil with his tools, when he has a fair shake and feels like business. I tell it as a friend."

"He won't kill me," said Painter, with a low, confident laugh. "Nobody cain't kill me on'tel I've done my work. I swore to git even; but I cain't remember on who, nur why I did it."

"It will all come back to you in good time, never fear. I've been that way myself more than once," with a side wink of amusement toward his friends. "Now, my dear sir, I don't want to crowd myself forward nor crawl into another man's hole, but if you happen to be lacking a friend who'll guarantee you fair play in this little affair, just consider me your pard for the time being. Jimmy Du Bree is my handle. Any of these gentlemen can answer for my record."

"You talk white, an' I reckon I couldn't do ne better," coolly returned Painter, all wildness, all doubt and uneasy brain-racking vanishing as by magic. "'Tain't me that is in sech monstrous want of a fri'nd, as it is that coon, yender. He'll want to borry a pa'r o' legs to take him home, fer I'm gwine to suck all the starch out o' his own, sure as death!"

"Brag's a good dog, but Bite's a heap better," sneered Dick Damper, turning and motioning for a drink to the burly barkeeper, who was suddenly bandaging his mutilated hand.

"Will you take a smile with me, to better acquaintance, my dear sir?" blandly asked Du Bree. "I've heard of you times without end, and am charmed to make your personal acquaintance, though I could have wished you any other antagonist than Dick Damper. Still, bere's hoping his infernal luck may desert him on this particular occasion!"

The subject of this pious wish, shot an angry glance toward the bold speaker, who blandly smiled in return. But the bully made no remark, for, bold, reckless though he was, he did not care to enter into a personal collision with the velvet sport, whose wonderful nerve and matchless skill with knife or pistol, was public property.

"You 'range the tarms, on my a'count," he muttered to a friend. "Make 'em so it'll end in toes up fer one or both."

"Mr. Timberlake, I believe?" bowed the gambler, addressing the man indicated.

"It wouldn't be easy to pick out a man as known me better," grinned the fellow, half sourly. "Lord knows I've dropped enough hard dust on the wrong side o' your table."

"Do you think the—ah—gentleman named has anything to do with either faro-playing, or dueling?" innocently asked the velvet sport, his eyebrows arching.

His main object was gained by the rather irreverent jest. He saw that Budd Painter was a stranger in the company, most of whom were mates and boon companions of Dick Damper, and he rather more than half expected a serious row, in case his man should come off first best in the fight projected. But the general laugh which greeted his manner, quite as much as his words, put the crowd into a more agreeable humor.

Between two men as thoroughly familiar with the rules and regulations of wild encounters on the borders of civilization as Jimmy Du Bree and Tip Timberlake, but little time was wasted in preliminaries, and five minutes later the terms of combat were plainly stated so all could hear.

"Gentlemen," said Du Bree, his voice cold and business-like, "the principals will be armed with their own weapons, unless they prefer to borrow other tools. They will be stationed in the street, where the moon gives sufficient light for fair shooting, besides being so much more romantic! They will be placed fifty yards apart, back to back, and turn at the word. Once facing each other, they may advance or retreat at will—if either be coward enough to save his life at the expense of his honor and manhood. There are no other regulations to govern them, or the use of their tools. But, if any outsider interferes to aid one or the other, before his antagonist expresses himself satisfied, he will be made the receptacle of all the lead you please to pour into him."

"Durn so much palaverin!" growled Dick Damper, pushing toward the door. "Le's git out an' git down to business!"

"It's the last chainte you'll hev fer blowin', so make the most of it, Dick Damper," laughed the Hard Man from 'Way Back, locking arms with his second and following after.

Out into the night, and along the sides of the moonlighted street flocked the crowd, constantly growing larger, as the glad tidings spread over Death-Trap Diggings.

The duelists were placed in position by their seconds, back to back, but separated fifty yards from each other; too great a distance for accurate shooting, even in the bright light shed by the moon, as many a fellow muttered to his mate.

Jimmy Du Bree had won the right to give the word, when it was checked on his very lips by a strange proceeding.

Two horsemen dashed out of the shadows and drew rein only a short distance from Dick Damper. There was a faint whistling sound, then a wild yell escaped the duelist's lips as the riders dashed madly away into the gloom, Dick Damper dangling between them, his feet just clearing the ground, twin lassoes tightly pinning both arms to his sides!

CHAPTER II.

AT THE RED LIGHT.

So swiftly and adroitly was this strange capture effected, that not one of the crowd of spectators suspected what was in the wind, or thought of any interference on the part of the horsemen, until too late to foil their audacious project.

A sharp, angry cry broke from the lips of Jimmy Du Bree, when no further doubt could be entertained as to the purpose of the mad riders, and his revolver leaped from his belt and spoke viciously, though there was naught save the echo of flying hoof-strokes to guide the humming lead.

The Hard Man from 'Way Back wheeled in his tracks, a mad howl parting his lips as he glared in vain for the man whose thread of life he had sworn to cut short.

"Whar is he? The coward cu's hes run away, but that won't save his appetitel I'll hunt him up—I'll find him ef he stops this side o' hell! Whar'd go, an' which way?"

His eyes flashing phosphorescently, his face strongly convulsed, Budd Painter glared around the spot, and then, guided by the direction in which all wondering eyes were turned he shook his pistols madly in the air, and darted away up the street, bent on vengeance.

Jimmy Du Bree started after him, but did not go far. He showed his white teeth in a grim smile, as he paused, noting the rush the crowd was making in that direction.

"Fun is fun, and I like it just as well as the next man; but it won't do to let it interfere with business. I did all I knew how to give that odd fellow a fair shake—not so easy a thing when Devil Dick and his crowd are concerned—but if he don't get picked up for good and all by some of that gang at his heels, I'll begin to think he is proof against lead or steel!"

"Budd Painter—the Hard Man from 'Way Back! Is he or not? Is he crazy, or only playing a part? Were those his mates who carried off Dick Damper? I'll never tell!" and with a short, hard laugh, the velvet sport put up his pistol and turning on his heel, strode away to his place of business.

If playing a part, Budd Painter played it to perfection. A bloodhound could not have searched more savagely for some trace of the mad riders who had so audaciously robbed him of his coveted vengeance; but fate was against him in this instance, and the confines of Death-Trap Diggings were reached without a glimpse being obtained of the two riders or their strangely-conveyed captive.

Perhaps the tragedy foreseen by Jimmy Du Bree might have occurred, for among the curious crowd were a dozen or more intimate cronies of Dick Damper, and the same suspicion struck them that raised the query in his mind; that all this was a prearranged programme, the wild riders being allies of the man who laid claim to that dread-inspiring title, and more than one hand clasped knife-hilt or pistol-butt as their masters glared cautiously around in search of the tough citizen, whose mad cries and furious curses had suddenly ceased.

It was something of the same sort that caused the Hard Man from 'Way Back to so abruptly change his line of conduct.

With still better cause for so thinking, he began to believe that the reckless riders belonged to the same gang as his antagonist, who were taking desperate chances to save him from being slain in the duel, and in hopes of finding out where he had been taken by watching the movements of some of the fellows who had occupied the saloon with him, the tough citizen darted suddenly into an alley, and making a circuit, doffed his hunting-shirt of fringed and beaded buckskin, casting it into a hollow beside a rock, pulled the slouched hat over his eyes, and then hung on the outskirts of the thoroughly bewildered crowd.

Eagerly he listened, but without receiving the expected reward. If any of those present could solve the mystery of the interrupted duel, they were careful to keep the information close locked within their own bosoms.

Gradually the gathering broke up and melted away in various directions. Budd Painter, his brain growing more confused the harder he strove to see his way clear through the tangle, turned back and recovered his shirt, donning it, and then mechanically wending his way down the street toward a brilliant red light which hung over the door of a rather good-sized building for a small mining-camp.

Not only was the glass globe of a rich crimson hue, but the entire front of the building was of the same color, formed of common window sash set closely together, the small panes in each being stained or painted bright red. Over the door hung a transparency, with letters of the same hue in a dark setting, forming the legend:

"THE RED LIGHT."

In a somewhat less brilliant guise, and under another name, this place had won a wide-spread reputation as being one of the few gambling-houses in the mining-regions where one could always depend on meeting with a square game of faro, though the builder and then owner, Jimmy Du Bree, bore the reputation of being an unusually lucky deal-r.

Two weeks before this eventful night word passed among the sports that Du Bree had sold out, and this was confirmed by the closing of the saloon for repairs. No one appeared to know who the new owner was, and when questioned, Jimmy only shrugged his shoulders and asked in turn for them to sling an easier one at him.

One week of curiosity, then the "Red Light" was flung open to the public, with a grand free lunch that "just laid 'way over anything Death-Trap Diggings ever saw in the way of nifty style," as one enthusiastic bummer informed a pard who was unfortunate enough to miss the spread.

But this was not the only fact which rendered the opening of the Red Light an event of no little moment to the sporting class of the town. The new proprietor proved to be a woman. Still more, though probably not a man in or around the place but what had seen her, not one among them all could say whether she was young or old, handsome or hideous in face, of their positive knowledge, though, as a matter of course, each man had formed his opinion, shaped by their devotion to or aversion for the gentle sex.

By day no one ever saw the new proprietor, to recognize her, at least; by night, or during her stay in the saloon, her face was closely covered by a mask which reached to her shoulders; her hands were incased in gloves, only the tips of her fingers being left bare for the better handling of the pasteboards. And mask, gloves, dress—all were of the same rich crimson hue as the beacon-light which hung above the door and shone from the glass front of the building.

Madam Crimson, as she had introduced herself in a brief, business-like speech, before taking her place behind the silver faro-box. So came to Death-Trap Diggings to make a fortune or lose one. She intended carrying on an orderly place, and to deal a square game, whether the tide ran in favor of or against the bank. As long as her funds held out, any and all wagers would be accepted.

"One point more, gentlemen," she added, with deliberate emphasis. "While I am in the dealer's chair, I am yours to command, as the servant of fortune, and hence a simple machine which concerns you only to see that it works smoothly and does not jump the rails of honesty and fair dealing. Beyond this, who or what I am, is nobody's business but my own. When I desire friends or acquaintances, I will select them for myself. If I am intruded upon, against my will, the offenders shall see that I not only wear the means of protecting my privacy, but that I know how to make good use of them."

As she spoke, Madam Crimson placed a revolver upon the table before her. And it, handle, cylinder, barrel and all, in color matched the hue of her dress, red as fresh blood.

On this evening she had just entered the saloon and seated herself at one of the two faro tables, the other being under charge of Jimmy Du Bree, fresh from his service as second in the duel which came to such a peculiar termination.

Instantly the table was occupied on one side and both ends by players, the majority of them being from the higher class of citizens, drawn, for the most part, to the saloon by curiosity to see more of the mysterious Madam Crimson.

Wearing her mask, which not only concealed her face, but also her entire head, since it reached the shoulders behind, revealing through eyelets, a pair of dark, lustrous orbs that seemed filled with more than natural fire, Madam Crimson deliberately dealt the cards, paying losses or raking in winnings, using her voice only when it became imperative. On those few occasions, her tones sounded hollow and unnatural, as though purposely disguised, or else from the muffling mask.

Seated directly opposite her chair, was a tall, athletic man, richly, yet plainly dressed, his garments bearing a fashionable stamp seldom seen in a mining camp. Diamonds glittered in his linen and on his white fingers. His face was remarkably handsome in both complexion and features; clear-cut, without being sharp, firm without being stern; his face was adorned by a heavy pair of mustaches and long, wavy mutton-chop whiskers, his pointed, yet shapely chin being smooth shorn.

Before him lay a large stock of colored chips, and at nearly every turn of the cards, he placed his bets, coolly and promptly, like an experienced gambler, who for the time being had no more nerves than a machine. Whether he lost or won, it was the same, to all outward appearance. Only when the deal had come to an end, and Madam Crimson was shuffling the cards, before replacing them in the box, were his eyes raised from the table and its painted layout. Then his dark eyes were riveted upon

her mask, as though seeking to pierce the envious covering, and read what lay beneath.

"Make your game, gentlemen!" said Madam Crimson, in her peculiar voice, unmoved by, or unnoticed his scrutiny.

"Whoop-ee, *hurroar!*" came a wild yell at that juncture, drawing all eyes toward the front of the building, where was the well-arranged bar.

The outer door was flung violently open, and into the bar leaped a wild figure, slouched hat pushed back from face, hands on revolver-butts, as bloodshot eyes roved swiftly around the room, taking in the face of each individual at one sweep.

"I'm Budd Painter by name, an' a full-blown painter by natur'! I'm A Hard Man from 'Way Back—a tough citiz-n o' the kentry on t'other side o' civilization! I got my tushes all filled up fer supper, when some pizen coyotes stole away my meat! Whar is they? Whar is Dick Damper? Trot him out from onder kiver, cuss ye, afore I flate my bellers, an' blow the hull durned shebang to never-come-back-ag'in!"

Colonel Claude Carey turned abruptly in his seat as that wild voice burst out, and his handsome countenance turned so white and ghastly that it seemed that of a corpse, rather than a stout, healthy mortal. His eyes were widely distended and staring at the Hard Man from 'Way Back, as though at a vision just risen from the grave.

But the hot blood rushed back to his cheek, as a low, peculiar laugh greeted his ears, and turning his head, he beheld Madam Crimson leaning across the table, gazing at him, her eyes glittering like living coals.

"Pardon me, colonel," she uttered, in low, soft tones, very different from those she used in the way of business. "You are ill, I fear?"

The man's wonderful nerve reasserted itself, and his voice was natural and even as he replied:

"It is nothing to cause alarm, lady; simply a little trouble of the heart."

"You should do something for it. I fear you have neglected it too long already," came the soft answer, floating across the table, and those marvelous eyes gleamed brighter than ever.

Impulsively Colonel Carey leaned forward, his eyes aglow, his face warmly flushed, his musical voice trembling with the earnestness of his utterance.

"You can cure my heart-trouble, lady—and you only!"

The crimson-masked face drew abruptly back as though the gambler-queen was startled out of her wonted composure by this unexpected countering, and if she intended making reply, it was cut short by the loud voice of Budd Painter.

"Trot him out, you! I got a morgidge on his soul, body an' britches, an' them as tries fer to run him off out o' my grip is gettin' monstrous on healthy! Dick!—Dick!—"

His hoarse voice faltered, his flushed countenance turned a dirty-gray, and a troubled, hunted look came into his bloodshot eyes. One hand was lifted tremblingly to his forehead, across the upper portion of which ran a purple scar, and he cast swift, covert glances around him, bursting into a forced, unnatural laugh as he noticed the startled, wondering glances interchanged by the occupants of the bar.

"Who said Dick?" he blustered, pulling the battered felt hat over the scar, and glaring from beneath its protecting shade. "Damn Dick!—Dick Damper! Whar is he? Who said I ever knew him? Who hear me ax fer him? They lie—lie like blue blaz-s, an' I kin jest eternally lick the hind legs off o' ary galoot as lets out s ch a whisper!"

"Devil brile ye fer sardines!" he snarled, with a sudden access of fury, gripping the butts of his pistols and glaring around upon the spectators.

"Who ye lookin' at? Did ye never see a straight-ha'red white man afore? D'y' know who I be? I'm a tough citizen from the kentry that was never yit diskivered! Jest one o' my sort was made, an' then the molds was bu'sted 'ca'se the 'teris run short! Ef I was to 'flate my bellers once, an' give ye a benefit, you'd think—"

"A little less racket out there!" cried Madam Crimson, and as the Hard Man from 'Way Back whirled sharply in the direction of the stern voice, he saw the muzzle of a crimson revolver covering him.

"A female woman, or I'm a liar!" he ejaculated, his wild eyes more widely distended than before.

"Woman or not, you must try to behave yourself while in this establishment, my good fellow, unless you wish to go out at yonder door on other footing than your own," coldly added Madam Crimson.

"An' serve me mighty right fer kickin' up a rumpus in the presence of a lady, too," promptly cried the tough citizen, doffing his battered hat and bowing low. "Ef I'd 'a' known they was a female critter inside o' earshot, I'd 'a' bit off my clapper an' stitched up my kissers afore she could ketch a crooked word out o' my grub-hole. An' you durned gaupers!" turning with a black scowl upon the amused spectators by the bar. "Fer two cents I'd lambaste the hull

kit an' boddle fer not givin' me the wisk in time to keep me from makin' a monkey show o' myself afore the lady! But she axes f'r law an' order, which jest saves your bacon."

"Johnny, ketch'l" and he flipped a gold piece across to the bar-keeper. "Solve that in the wust tanglefoot you kin rake up, an' pour the pizen down the thrapples o' these galoots, to larn 'em better manners, while I go an' tackle the ontamed tiger back yender."

Spitting on one horny palm, Budd Painter smoothed down his bushy locks, then, with a smirk and a smile, glided toward the faro table presided over by Madam Crimson.

Unceremoniously crowding himself in between two of the players, Budd Painter lugged forth a heavy bag of gold and thumped it down before him. Taking therefrom a few coins, he placed them on the queen.

"The fair sect ferever! An' it's a monstrous cold day when they goes back onto thar purty littly Buddy! Let her went, ma'am, ef you please," and he beamed benignantly across the table at the blood-red mask. "I'm sorry fer the health o' your bank, but business is business, an' when I've bu'sted the mersheen, I'll give ye all a chance fer to git even."

"Less wind, if you please," coldly uttered the gambler queen, pausing in her dealing to pay the bet placed on the board by the tough citizen. "You are annoying the gentlemen who let their money talk for them."

Colonel Claude Carey, only a few feet removed from where Budd Painter forced himself, had betrayed decided uneasiness ever since that intrusion, his dark eyes glittering and his handsome brows contracting as he neglected to place his chips with his wonted regularity, and now he leaned forward, saying:

"Shall I remove the fellow, Madam Crimson?"

Quick as a flash the Hard Man from 'Way Back turned toward the speaker, his eyes filling once more with that wild, insane expression, his hard-featured face working strangely. Mechanically one hand pressed the scarred brow, as though trying to drive away some troublesome memory.

"I've hearn that voice—I've see'd that face afore—but *whar?*" he muttered, his tones hoarse and strained.

His handsome face pale as marble, but stern and hard-set, Colonel Carey returned his stare without flinching.

Instinctively the other players secured their chips or their gold, and hastily withdrew from the table, leaving the strongly contrasted men facing each other.

Madam Crimson grasped her revolver, but maintained her seat, her lustrous eyes roving swiftly from one face to the other, as though seeking to solve the mystery which evidently surrounded the twain.

"I've see'd that face afore!" repeated Painter, his voice now sounding dull and monotonous, like one speaking in a dream or troubled nightmare. "Somethin' keeps whisperin' in my ear to kill ye—to wipe ye off the face o' the airth fer a pizen sarpint o' evil! When I look at ye it sets the bumbly-bee nest a-swarmin' ag'in in my brain, an' I cain't think straight. Say, you!" with a sudden outburst, his face hotly flushed, his eyes glowing redly as he leaned toward the colonel. "Whar did we ever meet afore this night?"

"In some lunatic asylum, I should judge, from your looks and actions. When did you escape?" sneered the colonel.

The trembling hand dropped from the bullet-scared brow, and a convulsive shudder ran over the frame of the tough citizen. His eyes flashed with a terrible light as he started to his feet, and his voice rung out hoarsely:

"I know ye now! It comes back to me with that voice! You shot me down when I wasn't lookin'! An' then you set the water loose to drown 'em all! I know—"

A fierce oath burst from the lips of the colonel, and like lightning in its swiftness, his right hand shot out from beneath his coat, clasping a self-cocking revolver, the muzzle covering the broad, heaving chest of the madman.

"Rapid as were his motions, those of the woman in red were equally swift, and a blow of her pistol knocked up the threatening muzzle just as the pointed hammer was falling, and instead of piercing the heart of Budd Painter, the bullet spent its force on the ceiling above his head.

"Peace!" sternly cried Madam Crimson, and with a pistol in each hand she covered the two men. "Peace, or I'll make war so bitter that there will be a double funeral to-morrow!"

As she leaned across the table, her weapon almost touched Colonel Carey in the face, and, though he did not take his gaze from his antagonist, there was something in her voice that warned him to obey, under penalty of death.

His right hand, still clasping the pistol from the muzzle of which curled a thread of blue vapor, remained where her fierce blow forced it, against his shoulder, pointing backward. A single motion would bring it to a level and discharge it, but that motion he dared not make.

Budd Painter never moved from his tracks, but with the loud report, the wild look fled

from his eyes, and an expression of bewilderment that was almost stupid, came into his face.

Sharp and clear came the voice of Madam Crimson:

"Jimmy Du Bree, please relieve the colonel of his pistol. No objections, my dear sir. This is my place, and I mean to see that the peace is maintained, if I have to fight for it. I entertain the utmost possible respect for you, as a gentleman and a patron, but that gives you no license to sling lead around after such a careless fashion."

For an instant the colonel seemed about to resist, as he heard the light footstep of the velvet sport approaching him from the rear; but something in those clear, metallic tones caused him to think better of it, and as Du Bree clasped the barrel of his weapon, he quietly released his hold on the butt.

"As a lady commands, I submit," he said, his voice cold and unnatural, though in nothing else did he betray the powerful emotions which raged within his bosom.

"And most wisely, my dear sir," smoothly replied the gambler queen. "It would tear my poor heart wide open were I obliged to lay so gallant a gentleman low in death; but business is business, and I will not have my place turned into a slaughter-house if I can help it."

"I was wrong, and I apologize to you. As for this drunken or crazy scoundrel, I'll settle with him elsewhere."

Meanwhile the vacant look was growing more pronounced in the eyes of Budd Painter; and as Colonel Carey glared at him with hatred and scorn, a silly laugh parted his lips.

"What's the rumpus, anyhow?" he asked, his gaze wavering from one face to another, finally settling on the crimson mask concealing the features of the gambler queen. "The bumble-bee nest is all broke loose into my head ag'in, but, ma'am, ef any orner galoot bes dared to give you any trouble jest p'int him out, an' hyar's the coon will mount him wus's a stack o' untamed painters! I'm a tough citizen from 'Way Back, an'—"

Madam Crimson came around the table and touched him on the shoulder, just as he was raising his voice to shout forth his wild harangue. Instantly he ceased, and doffed his hat, standing mute and respectful before her, even in his madness recognizing and respecting the superior sex.

"My good man, we know all that," Madam Crimson said in a soothing tone, much as one might use toward a fretful child. "You're a chief and a mighty warrior, and when your voice is raised for war, common braves run and hide under the bed or down cellar. We admit all that to save further discussion. But at the same time, allow me to suggest that this establishment belongs to me, and that I do all the preaching necessary. You have had your little fling; now go home, if you have one, before an earthquake comes along and swallows you up. It is a friend that whispers this in your ear."

"Ef somebody would only smoke out them durned bumble-bees out o' my cabeza!" muttered Painter, shaking his head dolefully, but then brightening up: "Le's irrigate, an' call it squar'! All ban's promenade to the p'izen counter—scoot!"

Just then a wild uproar came from without—voices crying for help, iron-shod hoofs trampling, wheels rattling—and a man burst through the door, staggering up to Colonel Carey.

"The devil's bu'sted loose, an' little ole hell's to pay, boss!" he gasped, reeling and then sinking in a heap, senseless.

CHAPTER III.

THE SPECTERS OF DEATH-TRAP DIGGINGS.

"HALT! Hands up, and empty!"

Sharp and stern came the challenge, in accents which plainly meant business, pure and simple.

Through the gloom ahead of the rapidly rolling stage it came, and as by magic a number of ghostly appearing figures barred the way, emphasizing the order by a liberal display of firearms, eac'i one of which the gallant driver, Muscovado Jack, could have taken his solemn oath was covering his heart or brain. In consequence he, as any other man would have acted in his place and under similar circumstances, threw the weight of his body against the brake, put all the power of his muscular arms into a jerk that brought the horses to their haunches, as he cried out excitedly:

"Hold up she aire! You needn't waste powder on my a'count, fer I'm hired to drive, not fight a hull army!"

So abruptly was the coach brought to a check, that the passengers inside, wholly unexpected anything of the sort, were thrown from their seats and mixed up in a confused heap of arms, legs, bodies and curses, fighting and struggling between themselves, yelling, snarling and groaning, kicking and striking, making a little pandemonium of their own, and thus playing directly into the hands of the bold road agents. For, while they were thus wasting their only

chance of escape by prompt action and concerted resistance, the ghostly-looking crew separated and surrounded the coach, their pistols commanding the interior.

Leaning forward from his saddle, one stern-voiced shape cried aloud to the struggling live-freight:

"Quiet inside, if you please, gentlemen! Untangle yourselves, and listen to reason for a bit!"

Like a douche of ice-cold water flung into the middle of a gang of fighting curs, that voice brought order out of confusion, and after a few moments of scrambling, the passengers began to realize what had occurred.

"Road-agents, by the 'tarnal!' cried one, with a curse.

"Hold up, by mighty!"

"Don't shoot—we surrender!" gasped still another, in tones of abject terror as his face fairly came in contact with the threatening muzzle which the white shape thrust into the coach.

"Durn ye!" came a half suffocated voice from the bottom of the vehicle. "Quit scrouglin' tell I kin git my gun! Cut loose an' salivate the p'izen—ouch! Thar goes a rib!"

"Resist, and you die!" sharply cried the white rider, his tones clear and incisive. "Submit quietly, and you shall not suffer the slightest injury at our hands. Step out, one by one, and bear my warning in mind. If a hand touches a weapon, its owner dies like a dog! Lively, now!"

Very human-like the words and tones, but the excited, bewildered pilgrims were in no condition just then for splitting straws, and to their very natural fears, were added others, as they caught a glimpse of their captors.

In the shadows cast by the overhanging trees along the steep hillside, close to the base of which the stage road to Death-Trap Diggings wound, these wild night riders looked ghostly enough, robed in pure white from top to toe.

In that gloom, they might readily be mistaken for a squad of ghosts, out for a frolic with tiresome mortals.

Animals and riders alike seemed white as the undriven snow, their vestments loose and flowing, waving in the night air at each motion, lending both a peculiarly spectral look.

"Skin out, pilgrims!" cried the driver from his seat on the box. "Tain't no use fer to kick ag'inst the pricks this time, fer durned ef they ain't a clean thousand o' the critters 'round the hearse, an' each one holds a dozen sixes in each paw! Durn it all—peel out! I kin see the salt-peter kickin' the lead out o' the guns from here!"

This adjuration was needless, for as the spectral rider unfastened the coach door and flung it back, the passengers descended in a hurry, each one careful to keep his hands elevated to the full extent of arms.

At a sign from the white chief, several of his followers dismounted and each took charge of a pilgrim, leading him to the side of the road and standing close behind him, with a cocked revolver touching his temple.

Two of the white riders stood at the head of the leaders and held them in check. Another couple, one on each side of the wheelers, grasped their bits with one hand, while with the other they covered the driver on the box.

He squirmed uneasily on his seat, but the weapons followed every motion, and there was an indignant ring to his voice as he finally broke forth:

"Durn it all, mates, you're rubbin' it in too mighty hard! Jest turn them pepper-boxes t'other way, cain't ye? I'm a noncomfighter, long's I fill the box, an' it's ag'in' the law fer to crowd a man that cain't kick back!"

Not a word was uttered in response to this injured protest, and still those black muzzles stared the driver full in the eyes. Then, sullen, feeling deeply hurt, but fearing to say more, lest those hurts should take on a more dangerous aspect, Muscovado Jack resigned himself to the inevitable and sat on his perch with uplifted paws, like patience on a monument.

When the passengers, four in number, were out of the coach and ranged in line, facing him, the white chief made another sign, and his followers quickly stripped their captives of all weapons, tossing them into the stage.

The leader of the ghostly road-agents dismounted and stood before the unarmed men, seemingly scanning their faces as closely as the somewhat uncertain light would permit.

A weird, uncanny object he appeared to their excited vision, and though more than one of their number would have faced an ordinary robber with boldness, they were hardly to blame if a superstitious thrill crept along their spines and chilled their blood as they met that steady gaze.

A pointed hood covered the head of the road-agent, descending to his shoulders, all around. In this were cut eye-holes, and a cross slit for breathing and speaking. A shapeless shirt covered the body and reached below the hips, the sleeves alone being close-fitting, and they were met at the wrist by white gauntlet gloves. Baggy breeches were confined at the knees, but hung in loose folds several inches below those

joints. White stockings and canvas shoes completed the ghostly garb, in all of which was not visible the slightest spot of color.

In a deep, hollow tone, the White Chief spoke: "You are wondering what and who we are—"

A snort of mingled disgust and anger came from one of the passengers, and he bluntly cut the White Chief short:

"Mebbe the rest be, but I ain't. You're pesky tramps that think you kin make a better livin' skinnin' honest men out o' thar dust, but you'd 'a' got more lead then gold from this ole coon ef them durned galoots hadn't tumbled all over me at the start off, so I couldn't pull six nur bowie!"

"Neither one nor the other would have served you in this case," coldly uttered the White Chief. "When you can bring down a wreath of vapor with a bullet, or slay a shadow by a knife stab, then you may fight against immortal spirits—"

"Sperrets be durned!" retorted the undaunted fellow, with a scornful sniff. "Hell's full o' jest sech sperrets as you be, an' ef you turn me loose with my sixes thar'll be some more thar—bet your sweet life!"

"Peace, fool!" sternly cried the other, his eyes seeming to shoot forth fire as he spoke. "Do not provoke a doom which may miss you, if wise. We are not the robbers you think, nor have we stopped you here for the purpose of plunder. We are not road-agents, in the common acceptation of the term, for gold has little attraction for such as we—reng'ance is our object in walking the earth in human guise, instead of peacefully slumbering in our graves."

"Oh, give us a rest!" growled the incorrigible miner.

With uplifted hand the White Chief glided forward. The reckless fellow, swiftly ducking his head to avoid the pistol of his guard, leaped half-way, his bony fists shooting out direct for the head of his adversary. But the fierce blows never quite reached the mark.

With marvelous dexterity his wrists were caught by the White Chief and held firm, despite his furious efforts to tear them free. Howling with impotent fury, the miner kicked out with his heavy horse-hide boots, but here, too, was he foiled.

A quick twist, a flashing of the white-shod foot, and the fellow came to the ground with a force that fairly knocked the breath out of his body for the instant.

"Fool!" sternly cried the White Chief, his cold, even tones betraying no emotion other than that of lofty scorn. "Will that satisfy you that resistance is useless?"

The defeated miner slowly sat up, holding his head with both hands as he stared into the white mask.

"Durned ef it don't!" he uttered, in a tone of dogged frankness. "Ef anybody'd whispered it afore I'd called 'em a howlin' liar; but I ain't got no business foolin' 'round you! So fur, I'm what you call convinced. But durn the sperrit part—I cain't swaller that, ef you sweeps up the hull United States with my karkidge fer a broom!"

"It is the truth. We are spirits—the ghosts of murdered men! Our assassins still walk the footstool, prospering in their evil courses, laughing all thoughts of retribution to scorn as they flaunt on their blood-stained gold. But the handwriting is on the wall, and the hour of settlement is nigh when the wrong shall be made right, and the sinners punished according to the magnitude of their crimes!"

Slowly, solemnly, in hollow accents came these words from the white cowl, his hands clasped together and uplifted toward heaven. And as his voice died away, a low groan came from his fellows.

Mummery, perhaps, but to those men who stood with a cold muzzle pressed against their temples, there in the gloom of night, surrounded by such weird, unearthly looking objects, it sounded marvelously like the "pure quill," and very different from what it might in broad daylight.

Even the miner was impressed, and evinced as much.

"Ef I hadn't felt a grip sech as only a man kin give—an' that man one out of a thousan'—durned ef I wouldn't be willin' to take my 'davy that you be ghosts, in good airnest—an' lick seventeen kinds o' stuflin' out o' the galoot as dared to say defrunt! But I cain't go back o' my word, now!"

"Stand up. Fall back to your place," said the White Chief, in his former cold, even tones.

Without a word the miner complied. He had shot his bolt and failed. He had met his master, and was man enough to own as much. He would give no more trouble without cause.

The White Chief tapped him on the shoulder.

"There is no need for me to look more closely into your face, nor to ask your name. Only an honest man could show the boldness against odds which you have exhibited. I apologize for the trouble and inconvenience we must cause you."

"Waal, I ber-durned!" gasped the rough fellow, as the White Chief bowed low, then passed him by. "You ain't fergot nothin', hev ye?"

"We are not thieves. Your gold is safe, so

far as we are concerned," coolly replied the strange being.

"I'll take it all back! You're sperrets an' ghosts an' spooks an' hobgobblers an' vampires an' wisions an' shades an' happyrishuns an'—"

The White Chief waved his hand impatiently, and before the miner fairly realized what was coming, he was thrown to the ground and his limbs bound tightly.

For a brief space he lay like a log, seemingly completely paralyzed by this treatment, but then his indignation burst forth in hot denunciations of both himself and the spectators.

"Now I will be durned! You ain't no more sperrets than you be gentlemen! An' I'm a hog an' a liar fer ever sayin' ye was! I take it all back ag'in, an' ef ever I git up I'll go through ye like a dose o' salts through a sick Frenchman!"

Another motion of the white gauntlet, and a gag was slipped between the wagging jaws, cutting short the torrent of angry words; then the miner was bundled into the coach.

One by one the Chief of the Specters scrutinized the three remaining passengers, asking them a few questions, sifting their answers as though seeking to catch them falsifying, but in the end he appeared satisfied that neither of them were in the black list at which he had hinted shortly before.

One after the other they were bound hand and foot, then tossed into the coach, and the door fastened after them.

All this while Muscovado Jack divided his attentions between the pistols which covered him and the operations conducted by the Chief of the Specters. Now, feeling that the end had come, he called out:

"Found the way-bill all co'rect, didn't ye, boss? Then I reckon we kin pull out fer Death-Trap Diggins, can't we?"

"Come down from that box!" sternly commanded the chief.

"But I ain't in the game, boss!" urged Jack, uneasily, his bronzed face turning pale and a wild look filling his little eyes. "I drive the hearse, an'—"

"It will be a hearse, so far as you are concerned, if you stop to parley!"

"Ef you wipe out the men who holds the ribbons, how long 'll it be afore your trade's clean gone? The line won't run ef they ain't no one to drive—"

An impatient gesture, and one of the Specters at the head of the team snatched a coiled lasso from his saddle-how, and the next instant the choking noose settled around the throat of Muscovado Jack.

"Come down of your own accord, or at the end of that rope just as you prefer," coldly cried the White Chief.

"Don't pull—I'm a-comin'!" gasped the driver trembling in every limb as he scrambled down to the ground, one hand thrust inside the noose to save his neck.

The Chief of the Specters met him and tore the weapons from his belt, then pushed back the brim of his hat and gazed keenly into the exposed countenance.

"How long since you first called yourself Muscovado Jack, my honest fellow?" he asked, his voice low and even musical.

"It was give me when a boy, an' fust went to sea."

"You lie!" sharply uttered the chief, his hand slipping from shoulder to throat. "Not three years ago you bore another name—that of King Perry. Shall I tell you why you changed it for another?"

"I never wore sech a han'le," faltered the driver, shrinking as far back as that suddenly tightening grip would allow.

"Once more, you lie, dog! I know you, clear through. Not a black page of your life history but what is plain as print to me. Three years ago you were called King Perry. You had for comrades in evil, Dick Damper, Conky Peters, Breechy Bull, Teddy Morau, and Jeff Archer was your leader. There was still another, a wild, reckless fellow, not utterly bad like those with whom he was associated, named Budd Painter, who called himself the Hard Man from 'Way Back."

A gasping, gurgling cry escaped the pallid lips, and Muscovado Jack would have sunk to the ground in abject terror, only for the iron grip that held him up.

A bitter, contemptuous laugh came from beneath the white cowl, and the Specter Chief flung the craven wretch to the ground, planting a foot heavily on his chest as he resumed:

"Do you still deny your old name? Are you convinced that I know your black past? Listen:

"You aided your mates to murder the first discoverers of the place now called Death-Trap Diggings, in order to obtain the rich store of gold which they had accumulated by hard toil and many privations. With them, you murdered your guide and mate, Budd Painter. You thought your bloody secret forever hidden with the bones of those poor wretches, but you were wrong. The dead have come back to seek a just vengeance, and on your head a part of the dread penalty must fall. Surely as the heavens are above us this night, you are death-doomed."

"Mercy—spare me!" gurgled the craven

wretch, writhing beneath the white foot like some crushed serpent.

"Mercy? Ay! such mercy as you showed those innocent beings whose gold you lusted for! Spare you? Just as you and your comrades in sin spared the gray-haired old man, the feeble women, the helpless lad! You sow the wind on that black night and now you begin to reap the whirlwind! Not one of the accursed band shall escape the penalty! The oath is taken and recorded in the innocent blood of those poor beings whose bones gave to Death-Trap Diggings its ominous name!

"You are the first of your band that has fallen into the hands of the avengers, but it has been thus from choice. The others are known and their whereabouts noted. They live only on sufferance, and because they must feel the pangs of terror—must feel that they are haunted by the dead—before the final blow is dealt them.

"In this you have a part to play, and for that purpose you are hero alive instead of a corpse. To carry out this, we grant you a brief reprieve from death, and because we know that with each breath you draw from the present moment until the last blow is struck, you will suffer the pangs of worse than death. You will know that you live only by our permission. That at any instant the thread may be cut. That, try how you may, escape is impossible, for though you will fail to recognize them in their disguises, not a step can you take, not a word can you utter, not a motion make that is not followed, heard and noted by your executioners. If you attempt to flee from Death-Trap Diggings, that instant will your doom overwhelm you!"

The solemn voice ceased speaking, and removing his foot from the breast of the trembling man, the Specter Chief made a signal, promptly responded to by the White Cowl.

They pounced upon Muscovado Jack, binding him hand and foot, then raised him to his feet and supported him in an erect posture before their chief.

"The first service you are called upon to render your judges, King Perry, is a simple one. In Death Trap Diggings lives a man who calls himself Colonel Claude Carey. You will have no difficulty in finding him. At this moment he is at the gambling-hell called the Red Light. He will be there still when you reach town.

"Find him and tell him all you have seen and heard this night. As proof of your story, you will give him a note. If he still doubts, ask him to inspect these marks!"

As he uttered these words the Specter Chief drew a bare blade from beneath his loose shirt, and taking an ear of the trembling wretch in his hand, severed it at a stroke.

A wild cry of pain escaped the man, but his guards held him firmly, and with the same stern deliberation the White Chief severed his other ear; then with the keen point of the crimsoned weapon, cut a cross on his forehead, through skin and flesh to the very bone.

"Yell on, dog!" hissed the strange being, replacing the bloody blade. "Your cries are like music to my ears, for they recall the oath we swore when we gathered up our scattered bones and assumed the garb of life once more, to seek vengeance on our assassins!"

As he spoke he ran a wire through the bloody ears, then twisted the ends together, and hung the ghastly token around the neck of the nearly swooning wretch. Just over these he pinned a white paper, folded and superscribed with the name of:

"COLONEL CLAUDE CAREY."

At a wave of his hand the Specters lifted Muscovado Jack upon the box-seat, and with a lasso bound him fast in an upright position. The lines were gathered up and wound around his hands and wrists, then bound in place with stout thongs.

The doors of the coach were securely fastened, though there was little chance of the inside passengers being able to free themselves from the carefully-applied bonds before the horses carried the coach into Death-Trap Diggings.

"One word more, King Perry," said the Specter Chief, as he mounted his horse and rode up beside the coach. "Fail not to deliver that note to Colonel Carey, and say that the Specters of Death-Trap Diggings are on his trail for vengeance!"

He drew back and lifted one white hand. With wild shouts the Specters lashed the frightened horses with their lassoes.

Snorting with terror they leaped forward, the coach swaying to and fro, while from the interior came shrill yells of mortal fear from the helpless passengers.

CHAPTER IV.

A MESSAGE FROM THE DEAD.

It was Muscovado Jack who created such a sensation by staggering into the gambling-saloon covered with blood, bearing his own ears around his neck, as mute but terribly significant evidence of the truth of the strange story he had to tell, and holding out the note he had been com-

missioned to deliver, sunk to the floor at the feet of Colonel Claude Carey.

Though taken so entirely by surprise, the gallant colonel was prompt enough in his actions, and before the paper could drop from the unnerved fingers of Muscovado Jack, he stooped and secured possession of it. A sweeping, comprehensive glance at its contents was enough to drive the blood from the colonel's face, leaving him pale as a corpse, while the start he involuntarily gave as his eyes met the signature, told how sharply the blow had stricken him.

For the instant he forgot where he was, and what his surroundings. A savage curse parted his lips. The paper was tightly gripped in one hand, while the other grasped a pistol-butt as though in defiance to the author of that note.

A low, mocking laugh at his shoulder startled him, and turning abruptly he beheld the masked proprietress of the Red Light standing so near that he felt sure she could, had she felt so inclined, have read the contents of that strange communication with perfect ease.

"Your heart again, gallant colonel?" she uttered, low and mockingly, her eyes gleaming brightly through the holes in the crimson mask. "Decidedly, you must take better care of yourself, and seek medical advice, or else Death-Trap Diggings may have to go into mourning over the untimely decease of her most honored citizen and main-stay—and that would be sad!"

Colonel Carey returned her brilliant gaze with a new and startling suspicion finding birth in his brain; but his temporarily demoralized shrewdness and wits were rapidly recovering their usual keenness, and the words which sprung to his lips were strangled ere they found audible utterance.

This little bit of by-play passed unnoticed by all save the couple immediately concerned, for the passengers whom the Specters of Death-Trap Diggings had sent on their journey in bonds were now free again, and each man surrounded by an eager and interested group, the peculiar adventure was rapidly colored to suit the spectacles through which each narrator observed his surroundings at the moment of capture and durance.

Colonel Carey turned swiftly upon the woman in red, his new-born suspicions trembling on his lips, the words being checked only by a violent exertion of will. But even his marvelous powers of self-control could not entirely conceal the effort made, and there came an inquiring light into the eyes of the gambler queen.

"You spoke, colonel?" she asked, softly, coming a step nearer, her small, gloved hand touching his arm, almost caressingly, as it seemed to him at the time. "I failed to quite catch the meaning of your words, in this dim light up here."

A sudden glow filled his eyes, and bending forward until his lips were close to her ear, he whispered:

"May I repeat them—at a more favorable opportunity and place? Might I dare to hope that—"

"Hope is common to all, colonel," with a low laugh and coquettish toss of the small, proudly-poised head. "As for daring—you do not bear the reputation of a coward, dear sir—and if I dare listen, surely you can utter the words."

"Thanks—a thousand thanks!" bowing his head over the red gauntlet. "Then I may call on you, at your home?"

"Whenever you please, colonel, between noon and dusk."

"To-morrow, then, since you are so gracious. I will try to show you how thoroughly I appreciate your kindness, then; just now important business calls me away."

Touching the gloved hand to his lips, the colonel turned and was hastening away, when the gambler queen called out:

"Your friend—your messenger, colonel? Shall I have his wants attended to, or will you see to him?"

Colonel Carey started and looked at the prostrate figure of Muscovado Jack, whom he had entirely forgotten. A swift glance around the room decided him, and making a signal which brought several roughly-dressed fellows to his side, he bade them lift the senseless man and bring him after.

His orders were promptly obeyed, and he pressed through the crowd that was steadily increasing as the strange tidings spread rapidly through the town. Just before gaining the door which led to the outer air, it was flung open and a tall, well-dressed man of middle age entered the saloon.

"Hello, colonel," he cried, cheerily. "What the devil's to pay now? What's this about a pack of ghosts holding up the stage and playing hob in general?"

"Jeffreys, you're just the man I wanted most to see!" exclaimed Carey, adding in a more guarded tone: "Come with me. There's the devil to pay, and we've got hot work ahead, if we want to come out even. Not a word in this crowd—come."

Accompanied by the three men who carried the driver, one at each shoulder, and a third with a foot held under each arm, Colonel Carey and the man he called Jeffreys left the

Red Light and passed through the streets of Death-Trap Diggings, pausing finally near the upper end of town, before a plain, strongly-built frame structure, the front of which was fairly covered with brilliant lettering, from which one could see that it belonged to or was occupied by the firm of Carey & Jeffreys, Brokers and General Agents, with Money to Loan, etc.

With a key which he drew from his pocket, Colonel Carey unlocked the strong door, and entered the building with his partner, the men bearing the form of Muscovado Jack waiting without until a light was struck and they were bidden bring the fellow in.

At a sign they deposited their burden in a chair near the round table, then doffed their hats as they awaited the further orders of their employer.

"We can manage the poor devil now," said Carey, taking a couple of gold coins from his pocket and handing them to the man nearest him. "Take a drink to our health, and his speedy recovery, my good fellows."

"Ef we don't git blind drunk over it, the devil's a hog!" enthusiastically exclaimed the miner, bowing and scraping as he secured the donation. "Tain't wishin' the boys any bad luck, boss, but durned ef I wouldn't like to strike another sech job every day in the week!"

"That's all right. Whenever a man works for us he gets his pay promptly, and enough to keep him from grumblyng. Get drunk if you like, but sober up in time for regular duty," said Carey, following them to the door and closing it after them, turning the key and putting up an iron bar.

"What does it all mean, anybow?" demanded Jeffreys, curiously, as he gazed down on the mutilated man. "What is this cock-and-bull yarn about a lot of road-agents, rigged up in ghost-fashion, stopping the stage—"

"If you heard that, you know full as much as I do," the colonel said, shortly. "Get some whisky. The shortest way to reach the real facts, is to restore Muscovado, and hear his report. Hurry!"

A hasty inspection showed the colonel that Muscovado Jack had received no dangerous injuries, his faintness being principally caused from loss of blood from his severed ears and the deep gashes which marked his forehead. Strong liquor was poured down his throat, speedily producing the wished-for effect, and the wretched fellow recovered sufficiently to sit erect while his hurts were being dressed.

Not until this was done, did Carey question him as to what had occurred. By that time Muscovado Jack had recovered strength sufficient to tell a connected story, and explain how he came in such a lamentable state.

There is no necessity for reproducing the tale of the "holding up" of the coach. Enough that the driver told the simple truth of the affair, concealing nothing; that he gave a close description of the appearance of the ghostly-looking band, and faithfully repeated the oath which the Specter Chief had taken to be avenged upon the authors of the Death-Trap Diggings massacre.

He told how he managed, despite his almost helpless situation, to keep the frightened horses in the road, making quick time to Death-Trap Diggings, their shouts and cries for help attracting attention, leading to their being released from their bonds immediately after the coach pulled up in front of the Red Light. Then, thinking of nothing but the message which the White Chief had commanded him to deliver to Colonel Claude Carey, he had entered the saloon, to fall fainting at the very feet of the man he sought.

As he ended his recital, Carey and Jeffreys interchanged glances, their faces pale, their eyes filled with anxiety. The colonel was the first to speak, his voice harsh and unnatural:

"It is some infernal trick to extort money; but the audacious scoundrels will gain more lead than gold, from me, if they try to carry their blackmailing scheme any further."

"Come, Jack; take one more sip of the dew, then you'd best lie down for a bit, and try to get back some of the blood you have lost. There's a lounge in the other room, which you can occupy for the night."

"I do feel powerful weak and fainty-like," muttered the mutilated fellow, with a shudder that shook his stout frame from top to toe, as he glanced apprehensively over his shoulder. "Tain't so much the hurt, nur yit the loss o' blood, as it was the oneearthly looks o' them critters; an' the smell o' my ears as they bobbed up an' down on my breast all the way to town, made me sicker'n a dog; 'n' I hain't got over it yit!"

"You shall have a bloody revenge on the cowards for this outrage, Jack, never you fear. They are earthly enough, be sure of that, to feel good lead or steel; and by the stars above! feel one or both they shall, before I'm a week older!" grated the colonel, as he aided Muscovado Jack into the little chamber which was separated from the office by a light partition of ship-joint boarding.

Returning from this, he closed the door of communication between the two rooms, and

dropped into a chair opposite his partner, who pushed a glass and bottle toward him, saying:

"Take a wet, old fellow; then tell me what this infernally mixed up affair amounts to, anyway?"

Colonel Carey filled his glass to the brim, then drank the strong liquor at a gulp, bringing his fist down on the table with a force that caused the bottle to dance a jig.

"It is some infernal trick—a cunning attempt to gain hush-money! But I'll see them essentially cursed before I bleed one red cent! Let 'em look out, if they try to crowd me!"

"Of course it is a clumsy trick," assented Jeffreys, closely eying his partner, for the first time thinking he had been indulging a little too freely in drink. "But who is at the bottom of it, and why did they pitch onto us?"

The colonel stared into his face for a brief space, then a hard, metallic laugh broke from his lips.

"A mistake, of course. We had nothing to do with the Death-Trap massacre; how could we, when at the time it probably occurred, we were miles and miles away?"

Jeffreys leaned across the table and stared full into the eyes of his partner, his own glittering with a stern fire that told of powerful emotions held in check.

"Look here, old man; what the foul fiend has got into you to-night, anyhow? Your words are all right, but there's enough in your tones to twist the rope around our throats, if they could be caught by an outsider. Curse it, man! you've been on a drunk since I've been away!"

"I've kept sober as a deacon, ever since," more composedly replied Carey. "It's not the drink that has stirred me up, but this wonderful tale told by Muscovado Jack."

"As you said, of course it is all a trick—"

"Words easily spoken, my dear fellow," with a hard, bitter sneer that rendered the face of the handsome colonel anything but pleasant to contemplate. "If they were only as readily believed, I'd be happier."

"What! you don't think—"

"It isn't what I or you think, but what some other person knows, that troubles me," interposed the colonel, taking a crumpled paper from his breast pocket, and smoothing it out before passing it across the table to his partner. "Just cast your eyes over that precious document, will you?"

Eagerly enough Jeffreys took the paper, and a grating curse parted his lips as he caught the first word.

"Your old name! How did they get hold of that?"

"Read on, and we'll see if you arrive at the same conclusion that occurred to me," quietly uttered Colonel Carey.

With breathless haste, Jeffreys obeyed, watched closely by the gleaming eyes of his partner.

"CLAY BENEDICT:—

"For three years, almost to a day, you have prospered in everything your brain devised, or your hands undertook to carry out. You mercilessly turned against your sworn friends and partners, and aided by tools that were only less evil than yourself, foully assassinated them, one and all, as they slept. You escaped with the blood-stained gold their energy and perseverance had wrested from the earth. You waited until you thought your crimson footsteps were securely hidden, then you returned to the scene of your soul-sickening crime, using your stolen wealth to further increase your store."

"But all this time, the mills of the gods were grinding, and now the day of retribution is at hand. You are doomed. Your comrades in sin are marked, one and all, and on their heads also will the bolt of vengeance fall with crushing force."

"The scattered and wolf-gnawed bones of your innocent victims have been called together by the voice of vengeance, and from this hour on, you and yours are haunted men."

"Your dearest hopes shall turn to bitterest ashes on your lips. Your cherished plans all miscarry. Your boasted wealth shall take to itself wings, and when your last breath is drawn, it shall be that of a beggar, unhonored, unwept, and whose very memory shall be cursed by all honest men."

"You may seek safety in flight, but it will not avail you. Though you may never recognize them, until the hour for dealing the blow for vengeance arrives, your every step will be dogged, your every word recorded, your every action noted by the Avengers. The instant you attempt to flee from Death-Trap Diggings, that instant will sound your doom."

"THE SPECTERS OF DEATH-TRAP DIGGINGS."

As this strange missive dropped from the fingers of his partner on the table, Colonel Carey—to give him the name by which he was best known to the inhabitants of Death-Trap Diggings—removed the chimney from the oil-lamp and igniting one corner of the paper, held it in his hand until the devouring flame burned his fingers, watching the fragment until the last spark vanished from the ashes, then blowing the powder to nothing with his breath.

"That shall never rise up against us as evidence," he said, with a short, hard laugh. "I only preserved it for your inspection. What do you think of it?"

"That's the note Muscovado spoke of?"

Colonel Carey nodded, biting the end off of a cigar.

"The identical one. What do you think of it?"

"It looks monstrous ugly—as though some of the boys had sold us out to parties bound to make a stake!"

"It does have something of that complexion, and yet—Jeff, do you believe in ghosts? Do you believe the dead can come to life, and return to haunt those who may have had a finger in their untimely cutting off?"

"No more than you do," was the short response.

"Good enough! Once dead, a corpse forever! But all the same, this has an ugly smell, though I hardly agree with you, when you lay it at the door of any of the old gang."

"But who else could write those words, or rather, who but one of them could give the information on which they are based? Surely neither you nor I?" persisted Jeffreys.

"You forgot that her body was never found," slowly uttered the colonel, the words seeming to issue with difficulty.

"Do you think it is her work?"

"Either hers or his!"

"Whom do you mean, now? Blast it, man, come out flatfooted and tell me just what you are trying to get at!" impatiently cried Jeffreys, bringing his clinched fist down on the table with emphasis. "Though my name was not mentioned in that precious document, I am about as deep in the mud as you are in the mire, and have a right to see whatever clew you have obtained."

"I mean the fellow who called himself Budd Painter."

"He was drowned, with the rest of the outfit."

"Then the dead do come back to life, for I met him no longer ago than this very evening!" positively retorted the colonel. "He was in the Red Light when you entered—is there now, for aught I can tell?"

Jeffreys stared at the speaker for a brief space, as though doubting his perfect sanity; but he saw that his partner in evil was speaking in sober earnest.

"You recognized him? Yet you did not kill him?"

"I would have laid him out, cold enough, only for the interference of Madam Crimson. She knocked up my six, just as I pulled trigger with a dead bead between his eyes."

"Who and what is she? A new arrival, take it?"

"She came here after you started East—yes. As to who she is, or what she is, if you can give the information, you can sell it for its weight in dust. The whole camp has gone wild with curiosity over her. Ha—what now?" exclaimed Colonel Carey, as his partner gave a sudden start.

"Can it be that she— Bah! that is impossible!"

Colonel Carey showed his white teeth in an unpleasant smile as he met the wide open eyes of the other.

"You think so? I don't. I've had my suspicions from the very first, though unable, as yet, to confirm them or prove them false. Tomorrow will tell the tale, so far as Madam Crimson is concerned. Just now, this infernal Hard Man from 'Way Back interests me the most deeply."

"If he is Budd Painter, he must be wiped out, or we're gone! He's a demon on wheels, when he has a grudge to pay off!"

CHAPTER V.

FLOUNDERING THROUGH THE MIST.

COLONEL CLAUDE CAREY poured out another glass of whisky and sat slowly sipping it, his eyes staring moodily at vacancy, while his comrade uttered this forcible comment.

Jeffreys waited for a few minutes, but as his partner still remained silent, he broke forth impatiently:

"Blast it, man! unlock your jaws and say something! What are you going to do about it? What is the first move to make? Or are you going to sit there like a bump on a log until the cunning devils bowl us over for good and all?"

With an evident effort the colonel roused himself.

"I've been thinking," he said, slowly. "We've got time enough for acting, if we are only careful not to make any false moves in opening the game. I'm afraid I made one this very night. Listen, and then tell me frankly what you think."

With an accuracy of detail that proved how important he deemed the case, and how deeply it had impressed itself on his memory, Colonel Carey told his partner all that took place at the Red Light after the man who called himself Budd Painter put in an appearance.

"What do you think of it? What of him?" he asked in conclusion, a curious light filling his dark eyes.

"That it is a nasty affair all'round, and one I wish we were well out of! As for that infernal rascal, what can I think, but I'm sorry you didn't do for him on the jump, before that woman could interfere. It must come to that in the end, and the sooner he is put out of the way, the less chance he will have of spreading the news."

"Then you think he is Budd Painter?" Jeffreys stared at the speaker for a few moments in open astonishment, then exclaimed, with an oath:

"Why not? Who else could say what he did? Didn't you say yourself that you believed it to be him?"

"I've been thinking since then, and I am by no means sure that my first conclusion was the correct one. The more I look back and weigh the chances, the more firmly I am convinced that not a living soul could by any possibility have escaped from that death-trap, after the dam burst and let loose its waters!"

"I wish I could share your confidence," said Jeffreys, with a shrug of the shoulders; "but I remember that we never saw anything of Budd Painter, soul nor body, after the flood."

"You might say the same of two or three of the others," retorted the colonel. "I never laid eyes on the body of Vernon Curtis after I drove my knife through his heart and tossed him into the race; but, all the same, I know he is dead. We never saw anything of old Ralph Burnham, though we looked so closely; but his bones were discovered among the others, when the work of the red-skins was made public."

"That's all well enough, but you forget the main point: Budd Painter has put in an appearance, alive and hearty."

"I'm not so sure of that, either," doggedly replied the colonel. "Look here. When the dam broke, Budd Painter was a prisoner, bound hand and foot. In addition, he was lariated to a wheel of one of the wagons. Those wagons were dashed to pieces against the rock walls, and of course the heavy wheel, with his body, would sink to the bottom. That would account for our not finding his carcass."

"Then who the foul fiend is this fellow that tackled you at the Red Light?" demanded Jeffreys.

"Not the Hard Man from 'Way Back, though the imitation is close enough to deceive almost any person. I now believe him an impostor, and one of a gang who have combined to squeeze a big stake out of our pockets."

"If he had been Budd Painter, the man whom I shot down in the Golden Valley over yonder, he would not have given me a chance to draw first. As it was, he acted like a fool, or a madman, as I believed then. Now I think he was playing a cunning part, to make sure I was the man they wanted—the Clay Benedict of three years ago. I think he is in the employ of the woman who calls herself Madam Crimson, or why was she so swift to interfere in his behalf?"

"Who the blazes is she, then?" demanded Jeffreys.

"I believe her to be that woman, Bertha Burnham!"

"Worse and worse and more of it!" growled Jeffreys.

"It does look infernally black, that's a fact," muttered Carey, thoughtfully. "I can hardly bring myself to believe it, but that's the only way I can account for the affair of this evening, as well as the trick those ghostly rascals played on Muscovado Jack."

"You know how I lost my grip on her, just when it seemed as though perfect success was rewarding our enterprise, and you know, too, what reason we had for believing her dead. But I begin to think we were fooled, that bout. I believe she got clear, and at this late day has turned up to avenge the death of her friends and kindred."

"It is barely possible," said Jeffreys, thoughtfully; "but hardly probable. If this Madam Crimson, as you call her, really is the woman you think, why don't she strike at once? Why does she half face her cards, and give us time to either run for life, or stock the cards to save our bacon?"

"Most likely because she is not absolutely certain we are the men she is hunting for. You forget that I am altogether changed in outward appearance from what I was when she knew me. Of you, and the rest, of course she could know nothing, of her own experience, and can only judge by your intimacy with me, and our partnership."

"I believe she has picked up a fellow who bears some resemblance in face and figure, to the original Budd Painter, and carefully trained him in the part he is to play. Not being certain of her game, she makes him play the role of a half-cracked rough, and then watches the effect of his acting. If I am right, I gave her the very clew she wanted, this evening, in my surprise when that fellow jumped me."

"What are you going to do about it?" asked Jeffreys.

Before Colonel Carey could answer this question, a tremendous explosion rent the air, causing the earth to quake and the building which the conspirators occupied, to tremble and rock violently to and fro.

The two men leaped to their feet, pale and trembling, their widely distended eyes seeking each other as the same fear struck them; a fear that the colonel's lips shaped first.

"That came from the direction of the crusher! If it is— Out and see, man! Don't stand trembling there!"

He caught up his hat and rushed to the door, hurriedly removing the bar and turning the key, then flung wide the barrier and dashed away from the office like a madman.

Wild cries and ejaculations came from every part of the mining-camp, and the citizens flocked out of doors and turned their faces in the same direction.

Not a score steps had the excited partners taken from their office before they found their worst fears were only too well founded.

The bright light of the full moon showed to their anxious gaze, a dense cloud of smoke and dust, rising in waves above the spot where had stood a huge, expensive quartz-mill, the pride of Death-Trap Diggings. Without it, the town would never have become more than a temporary mining-camp, to melt and disappear as soon as the scattered placer-diggings were worked out. With it, Death-Trap Diggings was making its mark in the mining-world, and steadily growing in size and importance. But now—

Where stood the costly structure only a few moments before was a mass of ruins, half-hidden from view by the curling smoke and floating dust. The ruin was complete. It seemed as though a thousand giants had spent a lifetime in tearing down and pulverizing the mill, leaving scarce one stone upon another, or a single plank without twisting and tearing it to splinters.

The shock was so tremendous that scarce a word was uttered as the crowd gazed on the scene of ruin. Even in that moment of stupefied wonder, they realized that this was more than the loss of the men who owned the crusher; it was the doom of the entire camp.

Side by side the two owners stood, looking at the ruins. Not a word passed their lips for some little space. The blow was too heavy, the shock too great for idle speech.

They were left by themselves, the others shrinking away, as though fearing to intrude on them while their wounds were still in the raw.

Colonel Carey's tightly-locked jaws unclosed with a savage click, as he muttered so low that none other than the ears of his partner could catch the words:

"The war has begun, and this is the first blow at us!"

"You think, then, that it is *her* work?" asked Jeffreys, in a hushed voice, his face pale as death, his eyes filled with a hunted look as they roved swiftly around them.

"The work of our enemies, whether she is the one we believe or not. It never happened by accident. The ruin is too complete for that. You know our rules about keeping powder in the works. I looked to that no later than this afternoon, and all was as it should be. It is not carelessness, not an accident, but a deliberate blow aimed at us, on the old score!" said the colonel, setting his teeth doggedly, his eyes glowing.

"What can we do?" helplessly asked Jeffreys, whose usual nerve and cool wit seemed all shaken and shattered by the bitter blow which had fallen so unexpectedly on them.

"Nothing at present. I must have time to think it out. Do what you can to aid me. Make inquiries and seem to suspect nothing more than that it was an accident. Keep that suspicion to yourself, and we may turn it to good account yet. If we can bring this deed to the right door it will count for more than that old deed of ours. At a hint the mob would tear the authors to pieces!"

A warning motion of his eyes called attention to the crowd, which was gradually closing in on them, with the powerful curiosity which is always displayed to great sufferers by fire, explosion, or that class of accidents. Not caring to be too closely questioned or watched just then, the partners separated and approached the mass of ruins more closely, asking questions as to the whereabouts of the men who were or who should have been on watch-duty at the mills at that hour.

There was little satisfaction gained. No one had seen either of the watchmen, and the cry suddenly arose that both unfortunates had perished in the ruins.

A wild rush was made by the excited crowd, and strong hands began tearing at the stones and debris, flinging the fragments aside as though in hopes of rescuing the luckless men with life. But this was only momentary. A single glance at the frightfully-shattered mass convinced all that no mortal could have survived such an explosion. Unless the men on duty had deserted their post they were beyond mortal aid.

Moodily thinking, Colonel Carey stood a little apart from the swarming mob, his arms folded across his chest, his head bowed, his dark eyes staring vacantly at the mass of debris which represented thousands of dollars. The mills had been of the latest and most approved pattern, and no expense had been spared in fitting them up for work, for the owners felt confident of being amply repaid by the reduction of ore, and knew that they could sell out for the first cost whenever they chose to do so.

Even now their mining-claims were sufficient-

ly rich to justify them in erecting another set of stamps equal to the first, but what guarantee had they that their unknown enemies would suffer them to do so, or to run it when once in order? Would not the bitter blow be repeated?"

His strong teeth grated together as the hunted look deepened in his eyes, and his hands closed until the sharp nails drew blood from his palms.

"By Satan! I'll fight them to the bitter end!" he breathed below his breath. "I'll strike back, and strike to kill! Only let me get on the trail—and that I hope to do to-morrow!"

His thoughts were recurring to Madam Crimson, and the suspicions as to her identity with one whom he had long believed dead, which were growing stronger with the passage of every hour. With a stern joy he remembered the appointment which he had made with her for the coming day, and mentally he vowed that its termination should find him in full possession of her secret. And if his suspicions should prove to be founded on fact, he would—

A wild, horror-stricken yell cut short his reflections at this point, and with a start he roused himself from his dark musings to behold the crowd flocking toward a little clump of trees, which grew some few rods from where the mills had stood.

For a moment he hesitated, a new fear assailing him, but with an effort of will he flung this off and pressed forward with the rest, crowding his way through the mob, his eyes glowing, his teeth hard set, for already he knew something of what had caused that startled outcry.

"Thar's a dead man in yender!" cried the miner who had made the discovery by accident, his face showing white and terror-stricken in the clear moonlight. "He's hangin' by the neck! I run chuck up ag'inst him when I wasn't thinkin', an' I ketched a glimp' o' his face as it swung around—an' I saw it was Dick Damper! Lord, boys, it's jest or'ful!"

"Hold!" cried Colonel Carey, in ringing tones which commanded instant obedience. "That man was in my employ. I have the right to investigate this affair. Stand back, all of you!"

Probably no other man in all that region could have checked the eager rush of the mob toward the spot where the man, murderer or a suicide, hung: but without an exception, the crowd halted, dividing to permit him free passage.

"Thanks, gentlemen," he said, his voice sounding harsh and strained. "If Dick Damper has been murdered, I will depend on you to help me avenge his death. But we must not destroy all hope of finding a clew to the foul assassins by a mad rush which will cover all traces on the ground."

Singling out Joseph Jeffreys, Carey beckoned him to bear him company, then entered the little clump of trees.

True enough, a man was hanging there, his hands bound behind him, a gag between his widely-distended jaws. A little streak of moonlight came through a rift in the foliage, falling across the face of the corpse, and the partners saw that the miner had spoken no more than the truth when declaring that the murdered man was Dick Damper.

But the keen vision of Colonel Carey discovered more than this, and with a stifled cry he darted forward and tore a square of paper from the dead man's bosom.

The light was barely strong enough for him to distinguish the boldly written signature at the bottom of the page; a signature something similar to the one which had been appended to the note delivered him by Muscovado Jack, two hours earlier in the evening.

This much he saw, then crushed the paper and thrust it into his pocket with a fierce, grating curse as he glared about him to see if any person had noted his action.

Only Jeffreys had witnessed it, though the curious crowd were now flocking around the spot.

"What is it?" gasped Jeffreys, his countenance showing pale as death, his voice husky with powerful emotion.

"Signed by the same—ya know," hurriedly muttered the colonel. "I must get where I can read it in secret. You look after the body. I must get away from here—I'm choas; I can't breathe freely!"

There was no feigning in this. The man staggered as he walked, and he felt that the crowd were eying him in wonder. Even then, when his heart was sick and faint within him, from the effects of these swiftly falling blows, he strove to keep up appearances with the public, and steady his voice by a desperate effort of will, he said:

"There has been foul murder done, but I have a clew. Let me pass. Do you aid Mr. Jeffreys?"

CHAPTER VI.

DEATH-TRAP DIGGINGS.

With this feeble excuse, uttered in a voice that only the most desperate exercise of his iron will rendered articulate, Colonel Carey pressed through the crowd and hastened toward his office. But long before he could reach it, his

eyes seemed to fail him, and his steps grew unsteady. There seemed a mist of blood dancing before his eyes, his brain whirled and throbbed as though on the point of bursting, and his walk was more like that of a drunken man than of one sober.

He gained the building and entered, casting a terrified glance over his shoulder as he crossed the threshold, like one who feels he is followed by a deadly foe, or expecting to behold a ghostly pursuer close at his heels. He slammed the door shut and fastened it in trembling haste, then sunk into one of the chairs beside the table on which the oil lamp was still burning.

He grasped the bottle of liquor and poured out a glass full, his hand so unsteady that the neck clicked against the rim like the echo of far-away castanets. He swallowed the fiery draught at a single gulp, and then, with a furtive glance around the room, as though fearful some enemy was watching his actions, he took the crumpled paper from his pocket, and using both hands to hold it steady enough for him to read the boldly-traced characters, perused this second strangely-delivered warning from the avengers of his past crimes.

Like the first, the communication bore no date whatever, and ran as follows:

"To Clay Benedict, alias Colonel Claude Carey:—

"Assassin—foul murderer of innocent women and children—for the second time you are warned, and as an earnest of the dread penalty which has been recorded against your name in the book of fate, witness the doom which has overtaken one of your tools in the massacre of those to whom the wealth of what is now known as Death-Trap Diggings, rightfully belongs.

"You stained your soul crimson for lust of gold; for it you most foully murdered those whom you called your friends, whose bread you had eaten, whose salt you had tasted for long months; by it you are ranked among the mining-kings, and common men bow down to worship at your golden footstool.

"You shall live long enough to see all this wealth disappear as though it had never known existence; long enough to learn that mankind worships your ill-gotten gains rather than yourself; then the blow of the avengers shall fall.

"A goodly portion of your stolen wealth has vanished ere you read this. Our hands laid the train and applied the spark. This is only the beginning, and other blows are already falling. You cannot escape. You are doomed—doomed as surely as though the worms were already fattenning on your foul carcass—by

"THE GHOSTS OF GOLDEN VALLEY."

Twice over the doomed wretch read these stern, merciless threats, then, his hands trembling, his face as livid as that of the corpse on which he had so recently gazed, Colonel Carey set fire to the paper, and watched it slowly turn to ashes on the table before him.

With a sudden fierceness, he crushed the filmy particles beneath his hand, then wiped the black smear from the wood with his handkerchief, as though fearful it might whisper aloud the dread secret, and bring the avengers of innocent blood on his track.

Again he drank, swallowing the strong liquor as though it was water. He bowed his head upon his hands, his fingers tightly clasping his temples, as though trying to still the mad throbbing which filled his brain almost to bursting.

Slowly his eyes closed, but not in sleep. He was thinking—recalling the black past, trying to see a way out of the frightful labyrinth.

Like a slowly moving panorama it passed in review before his mind's eye, each picture painfully distinct.

He remembered the day when he first beheld fair Bertha Burnham, while seeking some secluded spot where he might hide from those who were searching for Tiger Jim, the gambler, road-agent, train-robber, and reckless criminal in general.

He remembered how he made her acquaintance, and how he contrived to gain admittance to the house as a boarder, in his newly-assumed character; how he gained the respect and goodwill of father, brother, and herself; it all came back to him now, and a groan that was almost a sigh escaped his lips. For though playing a part that was wholly foreign to his nature, he was happy then. It seemed so refreshing to be regarded as an honest man, as a lover of religion and all that was good and holy and respectable; he, a man whose hands had been dipped in human blood while yet a boy—on whose head rested all the sins of the decalogue!

At first he used to laugh in secret scorn at the simple beings who took his false coin for genuine gold, but then came a change. The simple, unaffected purity of the wife whom he believed to be free, won upon him until he found, to his amazement, that he was in love, madly, irretrievably.

He remembered how he tried to reason with himself that it was only a fleeting fancy, and how he really tried to tear himself away, feeling that it would be worse than murdering her, to link a fair life like hers with that of a crime-stained outlaw. But he overrated his strength, under-estimated the power of his infatuation, and when the chance was given him to suffer her escape, he could not accept it. That was when Ralph Burnham told him of the contemplated trip overland to California.

He remembered the start, the journey, the pleasant days and still more agreeable evenings which they spent together, his love growing with each day and hour. He could recall, what he had not understood at the time, how Ralph Burnham hinted at Bertha being bound to another; and now, a grating curse escaped from his lips as he recalled his blindness. If he had only understood—if the old man had only spoken out more plainly!

He told himself that in such a case he would have crushed down his mad passion and fled from temptation. Then he would never have entered the Golden Valley, never have committed those crimes for which he was now being so terribly haunted.

It all came back to him so plainly now; how Ralph Burnham led them away from the direct trail, under pretense of finding more water and better grazing for their jaded stock; how they reached the little river which tumbled into the Golden Valley and formed the miniature lake; how the cunning old digger suggested a brief halt for the purpose of recruiting the strength of their cattle; how he led up to the discovery of gold in paying quantities along the banks of the little river, and then, when their cupidity was fairly awakened, how he unmasked the apparently wild scheme which had led him so far from the direct course to the Golden State.

He could recall the very arguments with which the veteran fought their incredulity, and he remembered how he, from a wish to prolong those happy days with the woman he now fairly worshiped, sided with Ralph Burnham, though all the time considering him the wildest of visionaries.

He remembered how the stubborn old man insisted on being lowered into the lake at the end of a rope, to dive to the bottom and there grope around until he filled a sack with sand, gravel and bits of rock; how the load was dragged from the water and put to the test; how loud the yell arose when the nugget of gold, dull yellow, looking more like a lump of clay than aught valuable, was brought to light; a nugget large and valuable enough to pay a farmer, as most of them had been, for a year's hard labor in the fields.

He remembered how the chute was cut and the dam built. How hard they labored, when once convinced that the nugget was not a simple accident, but that more of them lay at the bottom of the lake which Ralph Burnham proposed to drain. How they saw their wildest and most extravagant hopes more than discounted by the truth; how the bed of the one-time lake was literally carpeted with gold in nuggets, beans, flakes and dust; but among it all he could recall those blessed—as he deemed them at the time—hours after knocking off work and eating supper, spent together with Bertha Burnham, talking, singing or in strolling along the top of the dam where the cool breezes of evening were so grateful after an all-day siege in the hot valley with spade and pick.

His head sank lower, until his face was hidden on his crossed arms as they rested on the table, and a fit of trembling shook his athletic frame, as he came in his mental retrospect to that fatal night when he avowed his love for Bertha Burnham, only to have the scales torn from his eyes and the terrible truth thrust upon him—to learn that she was not only not for him, but that she was married, on her way to join the husband whom she had never seen since they parted at the altar.

Even that blow, he told himself, might have been overcome in time, by strong fighting, his love for her was so great, so pure, and her gentle influence had wrought such a change for the better in his nature; but then came the blow dealt by the strong arm of one whom he had looked upon as a jealous rival. Not even the fact that Vernon Curtis so gallantly ventured his life in the attempt to save his, when he recognized whom he had hurled into the madly burrying waters, could wipe out that bitter disgrace: and from that moment dated his downward career.

Everything seemed to play so perfectly into his hands, that a less accomplished professor of crime might well have been carried away by the temptation. The capture of Budd Painter, and the almost certainty that he had comrades somewhere in the neighborhood; the fact that the day following the discovery was that appointed for him to take a hunt for the purpose of bringing a stock of fresh meat; the finding his old comrade, Jeff Archer, preparing to depart from the camp where, as he believed, they had been deserted by their guide; all this, coupled with the immense sum which could be realized by a bold stroke, added to his burning lust for revenge on those who, his evil passions told him, had bitterly shamed and wronged him; all this, pushed him on to the frightful crime.

He recalled the death of Vernon Curtis, and a savage snarl broke unconsciously from his grating teeth as he felt that he had delivered blow for blow; whatever might be his regrets for the other deaths which lay at his door, he felt not the slightest compunction for that!

He shuddered anew as he recalled how he so

cunningly lured poor old Ralph Burnham to his doom; even now he could hear the sickening crushing of the skull as his heavy pistol-butt fell upon the bowed head, driven by all the power of his strong right arm.

He remembered how he silenced the frightened cries of Bertha Burnham, when she awoke at his touch; how he bound her and bore her in his arms from the valley of death, up the winding trail to the point where his partner in crime, Jeff Archer, so impatiently awaited his coming. He remembered how carefully he placed her on the ground, with her back supported by a rock, her limbs bound and she unconscious. And he recalled how he stood for a brief space before her, gloating over her pale, beautiful countenance, her symmetrical form, picturing to himself the sweets of conquering her aversion, of gaining her love, by sheer force of will, when his cruel work was done.

Then, in swift succession, passed the other events of that momentous night before his mind's eye.

The opening of the treasure-chest and *caching* its contents in part: the removal of the chest itself; the visit to the men who wore the disguises of Indians; the signal; the explosion and the frightful rush of water, filling the bed of the lake in what seemed to the watchers only a breath of time—and again he shudders convulsively as he hears in fancy those wild, horrible yells of alarm which broke from the doomed gold-diggers, only to be cut short and strangled in their throats by the tumbling waters!

He recalls how one stout man—a mild, good-natured giant, for whom he had ever entertained a feeling of contempt as one little short of idiocy—grasping a slight-framed lad by one arm, fought his way through the mad element to the foot of the crooked trail, and gained what seemed to him a position of safety, only to be ruthlessly shot through the brain by the man whom he had called friend. And he can still hear the imploring cry of the lad for mercy as he falls on his knees at the feet of the assassin, his clasped hands uplifted, his pale face wet with tears; and in his ears still rings the sharp report of the death-dealing pistol—still sees the bloody form of little Davy Burnham rolling down the steep trail to the waters which rage against its base, sent to death by his hand.

And then comes the watching for the approach of day, to make sure that none of their victims had escaped them; the sending Indian arrows into the bodies which the waters had washed out from the valley and lodged against the banks of the former river-bed.

But plainer than all else stands out a discovery that turned his triumph to ashes on his lips: the strange, unaccountable disappearance of Bertha Burnham.

Not a trace was left by which the problem could be solved. She was gone, but none could say when or how.

He recalled how he ranged the country far and near, refusing to abandon the search while the ghost of a chance remained, but all in vain. Had the earth opened to swallow her up, then closed again without leaving a scar visible, the mystery of her vanishment could not have been more complete.

And at length they arrived at this conclusion, as the only theory by which her disappearance could be explained: She must have recovered her senses and, realizing the loss of her friends and relatives, either by accident, or while driven mad by her great loss, rolled herself purposely down the steep trail to meet a grave in the raging waters below.

He recalled how they abandoned the Death-Trap with their blood-stained gold, finally reaching civilization, and there making the division as agreed on beforehand. How they bound themselves most sacredly to never suffer the slightest hint of the terrible past to escape their lips, even when they believed themselves alone with each other.

Then he and Jeff Archer held frequent interviews together, and in them he divulged the wonderful discovery he had made during those last few days, while plotting the destruction of his former friends. The rocky hills and ridges which bordered the river directly above where the dam had been built to drain the valley were stocked with marvelously rich gold-bearing quartz, and to those who secured the first choice of claims immense fortunes were in store.

Yet, knowing this, they hesitated to avail themselves of the knowledge, lest some suspicion of the terrible crime which must then be discovered should attach itself to their skirts.

Finally they invested a goodly portion of their blood-stained gold in an extensive plant for crushing and reducing ore, keeping the fact well concealed from the public, lest their secret should be suspected, and were making preparations for having the massacre unmasked when accident saved them that trouble.

A drunken Indian told a strange, wild story of finding a number of bones and fragments of wagons at a spot which he described. He had noticed bullet-marks on some of the remains, and picked up several Cheyenne arrows near

the spot, one of which was deeply imbedded in a fleshless skull.

Clay Benedict and his partner were among the first to hear this report, and the keen wit of the former suggested a plausible story of friends of his who had been missing for some time, and, under pretense of wishing to solve his fears, he gathered together the old band and hastened to the spot, engaging the Indian as guide, though this was only to avert all possible suspicion.

Other adventurers followed closely, for it became winded, no one could explain just after what fashion, that the persons whose bones were the topic of conversation had made a rich strike in the hills before meeting their death, but Benedict and his men were on the ground first, and pretending to discover the rich leads of quartz, they each one staked out a claim, following the veins as far as could be guessed, complying rigidly with the laws governing the Territory, and having their claims duly recorded.

There was a great rush as soon as the tidings were verified, but Benedict and his partner had secured the cream of the new strike, they buying the claims entered by the men who acted under their orders.

In a few months a town sprung up on the level below the walled-in-lake, and one night, at a meeting called for that purpose, the town was given the name of Death-Trap Diggings, in commemoration of those who had met their death there.

An accusing conscience hindered either Benedict or Jeff Archer from disputing the ominous title, and so it became widely known in mining-circles.

Believing it barely possible that Bertha Burnham had escaped with life, and might seek to avenge the murder of her friends and relatives, should she ever succeed in reaching her husband—whom, it must be remembered, Clay Benedict had never heard called by name—both of the partners had changed their names, and changed their personal appearance as much as possible, before settling down in Death-Trap Diggings.

All this, and much more, did Colonel Carey—no longer Clay Benedict—recall during the time he lay bowed over the table in his office on that eventful evening.

All had gone most favorably with them until that night. The stamps and reducer were erected, the ore paying large profits. Besides their own ore, they worked that of other mines, and having a monopoly of the business, as there was not sufficient outside work to justify the erection of other mills, they were making money rapidly.

Two weeks before a portion of the machinery broke down, and Jeff Archer, now known as Joseph Jeffreys, went East to purchase the necessary parts, leaving his partner in charge.

While he was absent, that strange woman, Madam Crimson, arrived at Death-Trap Diggings, and bought out the gambling-establishment of Jimmy Du Bree, altering it to the Red Light.

From the very first, Colonel Carey felt a strong interest in this woman, whose face not a citizen of Death-Trap Diggings had ever gazed upon, and when her room was opened for business, he was a constant attendant, and played heavily, as the surest method of attracting her notice.

Time and again had he asked himself what were his real feelings toward her, but without being able to answer the question to his satisfaction. One while, he believed he was deeply in love with her, despite the mystery with which she covered all her movements out of business hours. Again, he felt the gambler's superstition that she was "bad luck" to him, and that his only chance of counteracting this, was to avoid her presence as he would that of a poisonous serpent. But as often as night returned, just so sure was he to be found at the table where Madam Crimson dealt faro.

But now—that old superstition was revived, with redoubled force. He recalled how she had interfered to save the life of the man who called himself Budd Painter, and he began to believe that she was one, if not the principal, plotter who was dealing him such swift, terrible blows.

He lifted his head from his arms, his blood-shot eyes flaming with sudden passion, as he brought his tightly clinched fist down on the table, his voice hoarse and barely recognizable, as he grated:

"By Satan! I'll keep my appointment for tomorrow, and once in her presence, I'll tear that infernal mask from her face! I'll see who and what she is! And if—if it is her, I'll make sure work of it this time!"

Again he brought his closed fist down on the table before him, with a force that caused the room to echo again.

And like an echo, there came a sharp blow against the door, causing him to start and glare in that direction with a sudden fear in his widely distended eyes, his face pale as that of a corpse. His nerves were so terribly shaken, that for the moment he fancied the avengers of blood were upon him!

CHAPTER VII.

HUNTING FOR A LOST MEMORY.

COLONEL CLAUDE CAREY was wrong, when he decided that Madam Crimson and Budd Painter were leagued together in a subtle plot against him, for, until she heard his voice and beheld the impetuous entrance into the Red Light of the Hard Man from 'Way Back, the gambler queen had not the slightest idea that such a personage graced Death-Trap Diggings with his company.

Yet it cannot be denied that she interfered in the rough fellow's behalf much more promptly than she would had her interest in the high-betting colonel been less intense, nor that she mentally resolved to keep the tough citizen under close watch and ward, until she could learn from him, all he knew or suspected concerning the past of the gallant colonel.

But in the wild confusion which followed the coming of Muscovado Jack and his passengers, Madam Crimson lost sight of Budd Painter, who had left the Red Light with a vaguely defined purpose of finding Dick Damper, the man whom the unknown riders had so curiously stolen away from him just when he felt most confident of slaking his thirst for vengeance.

Dimly, vaguely, like one's misty recollection of some blood-curdling dream, Budd Painter knew that in the days gone by he had been deeply injured, or made the victim of black treachery, by those who should have fought manfully in his defense instead. When and where the crime was committed, he could not say with certainty, but, still with that painful indistinctness, something told him it was not far from where Death-Trap Diggings now stood.

It was a strange, pitiful search, that of this half-crazed man with a memory that only served to urge him on, without giving him any positive clew to the object.

In bodily powers and reckless daring, he was all that the Hard Man from 'Way Back had ever been, and it was this utter disregard of consequences which had led him to interfere on behalf of the cowardly bummer whom he found Dick Damper so shamelessly abusing. Then, as he stood face to face with the bully, he knew he had at length found one of the bitter enemies for whom he had sought so long and earnestly. He even remembered the name of the man, but that was all. The wrong in which he had taken part was still as misty as ever.

And so it was when he met Colonel Carey, face to face. At first he could remember nothing save that this man had terribly wronged him in the past. Then, like a revelation, the whole mystery was cleared up, and he uttered his fierce accusation. But it was only a momentary gleam of light through the darkness, and when the sharp report of the colonel's pistol rang in his ears, the cloud once more rolled over all, and the miserable wretch forgot even the startling words which had just dropped from his lips.

Stunned, bewildered, his brain more utterly befogged than ever before, Budd Painter left the Red Light, and slowly wandered through town, ignorant whether his footsteps led him, fighting against the dull buzzing of "the bumble-bees' nest" in his poor brain.

A reckless laugh came from a saloon which he was passing, and the sound attracted the attention of the demented man. He recognized the dive where he had met Dick Damper, and his eyes began to glow as he strode to the door and entered, glaring fiercely around in search of the man who had so strangely escaped him, less than an hour previously.

Dark and frowning looks met him, for many of those who had been enjoying the terror of the bummer when he interfered to spoil sport, had returned to the saloon after their vain quest for their comrade. The sight of Budd Painter revived their suspicions that Dick Damper had been stolen away by the friends of his antagonist, and meaning looks were interchanged which boded ill for the Hard Man from 'Way Back.

Budd Painter caught these, and his hard features relaxed in a grin of grim delight as he faced his enemies. That sickening buzzing was gone now, and he only felt the reckless disregard of odds which had rendered his name so prominent among the "bad men" of the mining-circles.

"Hope I see ye, gents!" he cried, doffing his hat and making an exaggerated obeisance to the gang of roughs. "Reckon ye don't know who I be, jedgin' from the way you're smilin' out o' the wrong side o' your 'tater-traps."

"Nur we ain't spilin' to know, I don't reckon, sence you played that dirty trick onto Dick Damper," growled one of the party, edging a hand toward a pistol.

Swift as thought the hands of the Hard Man from 'Way Back came to a level, each one clasping a double-action revolver, fingers on trigger, his gleaming eyes glancing over the polished tubes of death.

"Tetch not, han'te not—unless you're banker-in' fer a taste so durned knotty that you won't be able to git the kinks out o' your systum from this time tell ole Gabriel toots his horn fer the last gittin' up!" he cried, his weapons mov-

ing steadily back and forth, so as to cover them all in turn. "You hear my little song—an' it's your uncle Fuller that slings it at ye, honey!"

"I ain't so p'izen tender-skinned as some critters I've run aginst, but when a two-legged burro hints that he don't know me, nur don't want to git acquainted, I'm bound fer ter interduce myself an' make him a heap wiser then he was, ef it takes a bind leg an' bu'sts things wide open!

"Budd Painter's my name, an' I'm all painter by natur'. I've got teeth like a alligator, an' I make the bark fly forty feet from the ground when I sharpen my toe-nails. My tail is sixty feet in the cl'ar, an' it's got a double-bow knot fer every yard. When I stretch my jaws fer a gape, you kin see what I ett fer dinner last summer, an' when they come shet together ag'in, it makes you think lightnin' bes struck your meat-house!

"I'm a Hard Man from 'Way Back—a tough citizen from a thousan' miles t'other side o' the jumpin'-off place. They was jest one o' my sort turned out o' the fact'ry, an' then the boss molder bu'sted up the patterns 'ca'se he didn't hav stuff enough left fer to make me a mate!"

"Thar ye got my fotygraph, an' ef it likes ye so well that any o' ye wants my handwrite fer a specimint, jest gimme a wink, an' I'll plaster it all over your hide so thick you'll never feel it when the skeeters or fleas pay ye a visit!"

The beau ideal of a reckless, dare devil desperado he appeared then, facing a full dozen of hard characters, his blue eyes glowing, his mocking laugh ringing out his defiance.

Thirsting for his blood, eager to wipe out the insult his contempt was covering them with, the roughs hesitated to attack him, great as the odds were in their favor. They saw that he would shoot at the first hostile motion—and shoot to kill! Each man felt that his might be the first life called for, and that dread held them in check.

With a taunting laugh, Budd Painter glanced leisurely over their crouching, shrinking forms.

"A round dozen o' ye—a baker's dozen countin' in the cripple abind the p'izen-counter—an' not a durned one in the hull outfit got perliteness enough fer to come for'ard an' shake the paw of a man who's tuck all this trouble to interduce hisself! An' this is what ye call Death-Trap Diggings, ain't it? Better change its name to Coyoteville Soapstone Holler 'd be better yet, fer durned ef that's grit enough in the bugger to make a 'skeeter wink, an' the bollerin' part comes out easy enough ef a man looks to'rds ye!"

"Git out you! You ain't men—you ain't even the shadder o' men! Shuck your duds an' putt on dolly-vardens; do up your ha'r in kyuri papers; paint yer lips an' powder yer noses ontel ye kiver up the rum-blossoms, an' chaw stink-em-good fer to kill the smell o' forty-rod; singe all that onderbresh off o' yer mugs—but never ag'in try to putt on airs an' fool folks into thinkin' you're men, or durned ef I don't up an' whiddle out a shingle, an' take ye acrost my checkered apron an' give ye what Iaddy give the drum! Ef I don't, I'm a howlin' liar right from head-waters!"

Blunt as was this attempt at sarcasm, the roughs felt it most acutely, as was shown by their flushed faces, their glowing eyes and their twitching fingers; but steady as a rock, the Hard Man from 'Way Back held them covered, his polished tools dwelling for an instant on each man as they passed from right to left and back again. Plainer even than his words, his looks showed how ardently he longed for a collision with any or all of their number, and though they knew him well by reputation, they began to believe he must have his friends in waiting without, ready to "pile in" at the first signal, and this unfounded fear still further cowed them.

"Nur that don't tetch the right spot, nuther!" exclaimed Budd Painter, in a tone of mock despair. "I'll try it onet ag'in, an' then ef it don't starch up your back-bones a little, I'm goin' to part my ha'r in the middle an' putt on petticoats, so no durn fool won't ever think I b'long to the same sect as you holler-boned snipes!"

"Johnny-with-the-sore-fingers," turning the muzzle of one pistol toward the saloon-keeper to whom he had already given a severe lesson in revolver practice; "jest ornament your p'izen-counter with the 'sentials fer takin' a coffin-nail. Sling out your glasswar' an' acky-fortis. These sweet-scented buzzards is goin' to drink a toast from the ole man."

"Who's to pay fer it?" growled the burly Russian.

At that instant a tremendous report rent the air, causing the bottles and glasses to rattle and clatter, almost throwing the occupants of the saloon from their feet as the rickety building rocked and shook as though on the point of falling.

With wild yells of mingled alarm and wonder, the roughs made a break for the outer air, and though Budd Painter hesitated, it was only for an instant. Cowards though he had proven the fellows, more than one among their number would not hesitate long before taking a snapshot at him from cover of darkness.

With a panther-like quickness he left the saloon, not by way of the door, but leaping feet foremost through the window in the side of the building, alighting safe in a crouching position, pistols in hand, hardly scratched by the shattered glass, so dexterously had he kicked out the sash before him.

A little contrary to his expectations, Budd Painter did not find any of the roughs awaiting his coming, though their voices and heavy trampling were distinct enough. One and all they were running at full speed toward the scene of the explosion, for the time being forgetting all about the desperado who had so humiliated them.

The Hard Man from 'Way Back gave a snort of disgust as he put up his tools and followed after the mob.

"It's the wu'st town I ever struck. Not a durned bit o' fun to be hed with even a army. You cain't rub it in fur enough to strike grit, an' ef you do happen to run across one as says he'll give ye a turn, it's only 'ca'se he knows he's got fri'nds nigh to run him off afore lightnin' could scorch a grain o' powder, like that Dick Damper—durn the bumble-bees!" he muttered, pressing one hand to his scarred forehead, the old, troubled look filling his eyes.

"I know his name, an' I know his face; but I cain't place him. I know he played dirt onto me somehow, sometime, somewhar, but the more I try fer to see through the tangle the wusser the buzzin' gits in my ole cabeza, until it 'pears like I'm goin' clean crazy. Be I crazy, as folks says? I know I wasn't al'ays this way. I know thar's times when I kin see an' 'member as plain as the best; but it don't last. Them cussed bumble-bees git to workin' an' swarmin', an' then thar comes a sort o' snap, an' my brain is like it was chuck-full o' water, a-roarin' like mad! An' then—what comes next I cain't tell! Purty nigh al'ays I wake up in a new kentry from the one I'member last, an' thar's never nobody kin say how I come thar; not even my own self!"

His mutterings ceased, for he was now close to where the tremendous explosion had taken place. He stared around him with a vacant air. All the fire and force so recently exhibited by him, in the face of such heavy odds, had faded away.

It was as he said—he lived a double life. So long as he did not try to recall the past, so long as nothing occurred to make him attempt to pierce the mists with which that past was shrouded, Budd Painter seemed as sane and shrewd as the best of those with whom chance threw him. But a word, a chance expression, a sound, even, was often sufficient to throw his shattered mind off its balance, and then he was indeed a madman.

He was among the crowd that flocked to the spot where the hanging corpse of Dick Damper was found, though he did not get close enough to recognize the carcass until Colonel Carey had taken his departure, unseen, unheard by him; but the instant he caught sight of the agony distorted countenance, a wild cry escaped his lips.

"It's Dick Damper! I know him—I've see'd him afore—he's a p'izen serpent! Ef I could only place him—ef I could only tell who an' what he was in them black days! But them pesky bumble-bees won't let me! They keep a-singin' an' a-buzzin' an' tellin' me this, that an' the other; but it's all a twisted tangle, an' I cain't tell the head from the tail."

"Who killed him? Who cheated me out o' my git-even?" and the poor wretch stared wildly around him, pistols drawn, the crowd falling back and leaving him in a cleared space by himself. "Show me the man; show me—Le's all han's take a snorter. Sling 'em out, Johnny; sling 'em—"

His words died away in a vacant laugh, that only too clearly betrayed his unsettled brain; and not a hand was lifted to stay his steps, as he staggered away from the spot where one of his enemies had so strangely come by his death.

There was one white scared face in the crowd through which Budd Painter unsteadily made his way, and as he passed by, its owner hurried to where Joseph Jeffreys stood, as yet ignorant of what was passing beneath the death-tree, and with lips close to his ear, whispered:

"Hell's bu'sted loose, I reckon, cap'n, fer ef I ain't see'd Budd Painter or his ghost, I'm a howlin' liar!"

"You're sure? There's no mistake?" demanded Jeffreys.

"He passed by so cluss that I could 'a' tatched him with ary hand, boss. Ef I hadn't thunk mebbe it was his ghost, I'd 'a' run my knife atwixt his ribs—but I didn't dast to!"

The speaker was a short, heavily-built ruffian, known as Breachy Bull, in all probability gaining the title from his ugly, truculent disposition, and he had been one of the party under command of Jeff Archer when the massacre of Golden Valley took place. It chanced that he had seen nor heard anything of the doings of Budd Painter in town that night, and when so unexpectedly brought face to face with a man whom he, in common with his fellows, had regarded as dead for years, the shock was quite

sufficient to shatter his boasted nerve, and send the cold chills racing along his spinal column.

"It's no ghost—worse luck!" grated Jeffreys.

"Shell I pick up some o' the boys an' knife him, boss?"

"Get what boys you can trust, but don't waste time and so lose sight of him," was the hasty reply. "Dog him, but don't kill him unless you have to. Take him prisoner and leave him in a safe place under guard, while you come back and tell me. Take him alive, you understand? He must squeal before he croaks for good. Git—good work, good pay!"

That was sufficient, and Breachy Bull hastened away to find his fellows.

Budd Painter staggered away from the scene of the explosion, his poor brain in a whirl, scarce conscious of what he was doing or whither he was going. He returned to town, and entered the first saloon he came to which had not been closed by its startled owner to hasten to see what had occurred.

As the owner complied with his muttered request for a drink, he asked him what had caused the explosion. Painter glared sullenly into his face for a moment, then flung glass and all at his head, turning and leaving the saloon without a word, almost running into the arms of three men who had followed hard on his tracks.

Half-blinded by the light of the saloon which he had just left, Painter failed to recognize Breachy Bull or his mates, but a savage oath burst from his lips as he flung out his strong arm and brushed them from the path as though only feeble children.

"Ef ye don't like the taste o' it, jest pile in, durn ye!" he growled, hand on revolver.

But the blunt challenge was not accepted. It was not their purpose to kill him, as long as they saw a chance to effect his capture, and shrinking to one side, they suffered him to pass along.

In swift succession the Hard Man from 'Way Back visited nearly a dozen saloons, drinking at each, but not stopping long in either. It was a strange mood for him, and one into which he seldom fell, but for the time it held full possession.

Gradually there came a change, though the poison he had swallowed so freely, did not seem to affect him in the least.

He turned away from the town, unconscious of the fact of his being dogged by deadly enemies, and slowly left the town behind him, rounding the point of rocks, and then climbing up a dry gulch where the boulders lay thick and massive.

It was the one-time race into which Clay Benedict had hurled Vernon Curtis.

Since that terrible night no water had passed through the chute, save what dropped from the clouds. At one time there had been some talk of rebuilding the dam and draining the little lake, in search of gold, but the influence of Colonel Carey and his partner defeated the scheme and all was left as it had been found in the first days of Death-Trap Diggings.

Budd Painter reached the top of the chute, and sat down on the end of the destroyed dam, supporting his elbows on his knees, his chin resting on his joined palms as he stared moodily down upon the lake, glimmering beneath the bright light of the moon.

Great drops stood out on his bullet-scarred brow, and an occasional fit of trembling shook his strong frame.

"It's the same, an' yit it's deffrunt!" he muttered, his voice sounding hollow and unnatural. "I kin 'member it fer a breath, but afore I kin ketch onto its full meanin', that infarnal buzzin' comes back into my pore ole cabeza, an' it's gone ag'in like a shadde."

"I kin hear the water—that was thar, though it come in a bigger heap, an' made more row then this. Then thar was shootin'—or did that come fust? I don't know—I cain't tell—it's all black—black as bell itself!"

With a bitter groan, his face sunk into his hands, their fingers gripping his head as though he feared his skull would burst asunder without that support. He was doing bitter battle with the terrible past. He was struggling to find a lost memory, and words are powerless to tell how frightfully he suffered as he groped in the bitter black mists.

Like sleuth-hounds the three men had followed him, their coarse natures rather rejoicing than otherwise, as they saw him take the trail leading to the ruined dam. If they ever thought of that night of murder, three years old, it was to smile and chuckle at the cunning which marked their plans, the thoroughness of its execution. Naught of remorse or repentance were they capable of feeling.

Slowly, silently they stole closer to the bowed form of their intended victim. For a few minutes they hesitated to make the assault, fearing that a struggle so close to the waterfall might end in their tumbling over the end of the old dam. But as the shaggy head sunk still lower, and Budd Painter gave no signs of altering his position, Breachy Bull touched his mates as a signal, and stripping off his flannel shirt, he twisted it into a sort of bag, then leaped forward, casting the heavy garment over the bowed head, jerking heavily upon it.

Taken completely by surprise, Budd Painter was able to make but a comparatively feeble resistance against the three strong men who piled on top of him, grappling with desperate vigor his limbs, his throat.

Yet he did fight, and it was not wholly without marks of his prowess that the ruffians at length arose, the victors, the Hard Man from 'Way Back lying on his back, his limbs bound with strong cords, his blue eyes glaring the defiance and hatred his gagged lips were unable to utter.

"Drag the p'izen cuss back 'mongst the rocks, an' keep good watch over him," said Breachy Bull, shaking himself as he donned his shirt again. "I'm off to let the boss know how the ole thing panned out."

His mates obeyed, and he set off for town to report.

CHAPTER VIII.

TANGLED IN THE MESHES.

BREACHY BULL lost little time after once separating from his comrades, but hastened at once to the scene of the explosion, where he found Joseph Jeffreys still busied with his investigations, but all these were forgotten when he beheld his emissary returning, and in a quick, impatient whisper he demanded:

"What luck? You haven't missed him? Curse it, speak up!"

"Got him tight as wax," was the prompt reply, in the same guarded tone. "Jest come to let you know an' ax what we is to do with the p'izen critter."

"Where is he? How did you manage—Never mind," hastily checking the torrent of questions which were on the point of pouring from his lips: "show me the place, and I'll decide after taking a square look at the fellow."

By this time, the crowd attracted by the explosion, had greatly diminished, the large majority having returned to the town proper, where they could discuss the calamity as well as the mysterious death of Dick Damper, each man over a glass of his favorite "wet," with a greater degree of comfort than was to be found there under the moonlight.

Thanks to this fact, it was not so difficult for Jeffreys to steal away without being noticed particularly, and he was soon following the lead of Breachy Bull around the point of rocks, up the steep to the point where Budd Painter lay bound hand and foot, guarded by two men whose cocked revolvers were kept close to his temples, so great was their fear of the famous brother desperado, the Hard Man from 'Way Back.

Jeffreys knelt beside the prisoner, and his keen eyes carefully inspected the face on which the clear rays of the moon fell almost perpendicularly. His brows contracted as he gazed. One instant he felt convinced that this was indeed the man whom they had doomed to death, three years ago; the next, he doubted. It was the same man, yet with a difference that could not be overlooked.

"So much the worse for you, then!" he muttered, with a short, hard laugh, as he rose to his feet, giving the bound man a thrust with the toe of his boot that drew a glare of deadly hatred upon him from those bloodshot eyes.

"You'll kick the bucket for your cursed impudence in looking like another fellow, and I don't reckon there'll be many tears shed over the mistake—if blurder it be!"

"I kin sw'ar to him, boss," eagerly muttered Breachy Bull, who shrewdly calculated that his pay would be in proportion to the importance of his capture. "He's that dirty cuss, Budd Painter, easy enough. I'll take my davy on that!"

"You are willing to take longer chances than I am, then," was the careless reply. "We'll let the colonel decide whether or no he's the original Jacobs. But how to get him down to the office without being seen, or rousing suspicion: that's what bothers me."

"Me'n the boys kin do it, boss," said Breachy Bull, confidently. "Jest say whar you want him tuck, an' we'll see be gits thar right eend up'ards, without a timber sprung or a bolt loosened."

"Have your own way, my good fellow. But don't run too many chances, or give him too much play. There's the devil sticking out of his eyes, bigger'n a woodchuck, and you all know what Budd Painter's reputation is—or was."

"Don't ye worry no trouble, boss; he'll come through all right, or you kin use me fer a scrub-brush to clean out hog-pens with," grinned the sturdy ruffian.

"Remember this," impressively added Jeffreys, turning back to add the caution. "If he is Budd Painter, he has got friends in Death-Trap Diggings, and if they spot him in limbo, there'll be steel drawn and powder burned, sure! I'll keep an eye on you, and if there's any trouble, will take a hand in. At all risks, be must squeal before he croaks."

Jeffreys turned and descended to the level, leaving his tools to do the rest.

"Now lads," said Bull, "this is the programme. We got to git this overgrown cuss down to the cap'n's office, with a bull hide. It'd

be easy enough fer to tote him like a log or a corpus, but that won't do. Somebody'd be jest darned impudent enough fer to ax us what in blazes we got, an' how the devil he come ye so? an' that wouldn't jump with the idees o' the old man—see?"

"Reckon we kin let on he's drunk," suggested one.

"You *shet!*" angrily growled the ruffian, disgusted to see his own thunders stolen from between his teeth after that unceremonious fashion. "Who's bossin' this job, anyhow?"

"Oh, I ain't a-kickin'. Jest so ye git through with it in time fer grub in the mornin'," was the indifferent retort.

"Well, button up your lip, then, an' don't be so durned fresh. Thar's only the one way fer to do the job, without runnin' too much risk, an' this is the how."

Aided by his two mates, Breachy Bull lifted their captive to his feet, pulled the slouched felt hat far over his eyes, and half-dragged, half-carried him down the slope to the level ground. Then he sternly addressed Painter:

"I'm goin' to cut your hoofs loose, so you kin do a little walkin' on your own hook, but m'ind how you try any o' your tricks, or it'll be the wuss fer your health. You're a mate o' oun what hes filled hisself chuck-full o' tanglefoot, an' we're helpin' you to your bunk to sleep it off. Ef anybody sticks thar nose into the afa'r, thar's goin' to be a high ole circus, an' you'll git about six inches o' good steel right whar you live, the fust jump-off!"

Owing to the gag which filled his jaws, Budd Painter made no reply, but to show his contempt of their threats, he hung like a lifeless weight on their arms, refusing to help himself in the slightest degree. Cursing savagely, Breachy Bull struck him heavily, but with no other effect than to elicit a series of desperate kicks from the freed limbs.

"Ef you won't go one way, you will another," he snarled, dealing the Hard Man from 'Way Back a heavy blow on the temple, depriving him of his senses. "Now ye be drunk, durn ye! Ketch holt, boys, an' le's git him to headquarters afore he comes to ag'in—the bull-headed critter!"

Supporting the prisoner between them, exactly as though he was so far under the influence of drink as to be incapable of helping himself, the ruffians entered Death-Trap Diggings, and were joined by Joseph Jeffreys as they drew near the office where Colonel Carey was then fighting the ghosts of the black and sinful past.

It was the knock of Jeffreys that so startled the criminal, and even as he grasped his revolvers to give battle to the avengers of blood, Carey recognized the voice:

"Open up, old man, in a hurry! We've got game here that will be safer under shelter. Open up, curse it all!"

With a desperate effort of will, Colonel Carey recovered his powers sufficiently to comply, and hustling their captive inside, Jeffreys made haste to close the door behind them.

"There's your bug-a-boo, old fellow," he laughed, as the ruffians placed their helpless burden in a chair. "Examine him at your leisure and see if it is the original Jacobs—for I'm blessed if I ever tell you!"

With a snarl that was beast-like in its intensity Colonel Carey stole to the side of the prisoner, tearing the hat from his head, staring into the face thus revealed, his eye glowing redly, his white teeth showing through his curled-back lips, his fingers closing and unclosing as though they longed to bury themselves in that brawny throat.

Jeffreys placed a warning hand on his shoulders as he turned to the ruffians, holding out a few gold coins.

"That's only an earnest of what you'll reap for this bit of work, my lads," he said, lightly. "Take it and go wet your whistles, but don't get too drunk for work. I'll see you in the morning. So-long, lads!"

Breachy Bull and his mates were nothing loth, and, taking the hint with the gold, hastily beat their retreat.

"There's no necessity for letting them know any more than we can help," said Jeffreys. "You're all out of whack, old fellow, and if there really is a combination forming against us, as you seem to suspect, the closer we keep our cards to ourselves the more chance we have of winning the game."

Colonel Carey yielded to the force which drew him away from his victim, and with a trembling hand lifted to his lips the glass of whisky which Jeffreys poured out for him.

As he did so he saw the eyes of Budd Painter open widely and roll around the room in a vacant, bewildered stare.

"Good!" he cried, with a savage snarl. "I thought you had brought me a corpse. He shall speak out and solve this infernal mystery or I'll skin him alive! I'll—"

"Make him squeal, of course," soothingly replied Jeffreys as he hastened to the side of the captive, producing a stout coil of line, and with it tying the feet of Budd Painter to the chair on which he was sitting. "But there's time enough. You want to simmer down and get

back a little of your old nerve before tackling him. You'd take fire and kill him, before he could tell half he knows, the way you are now."

But the blood-stained criminal was past listening to reason, and a howling curse burst from his foam-flecked lips, as he leaped to his feet, and leaped forward.

"Cut loose that gag—set his tongue free, and I'll make it wag free enough! He shall tell all, or I'll murder him by inches—I'll slay him alive!"

He said no more. The door leading to the inner apartment, where a short time earlier in the night, Muscovado Jack had been placed to sleep off the effects of his trials, was silently flung open, and half a dozen weird-looking shapes leaped out on the partners, grappling with them, and flinging them to the floor so suddenly that neither could draw a weapon, or strike a blow in self-defense.

So swift was the assault, so dexterously did the assailants perform their work, that before either Colonel Carey or Joseph Jeffreys could cry out for help, they were bound hand and foot, with a suffocating gag thrust between the jaws of each. And not until then, did either of the partners catch a fair view of their captors.

But now their eyes started almost from their sockets as they stared at the ghostly figures ranged before them; and little marvel that such should be the case.

Six in all, and each one wearing the peculiar garb so graphically described by Muscovado Jack; the cowl like hood, with its three apertures for sight and speech; the loose shirt resembling the military camisade of olden times; the Turkish trowsers, confined at the knee; the stockings and shoes—all of spotless white; the ghostly uniform chosen by the avengers of the Death-Trap massacre.

One of their number stood a little in advance, and from his cowl came in deep, hollow tones the words:

"Clay Benedict and Jefferson Archer, you are doomed! Not all the powers of heaven nor hell can save you now! You have run your course of crime, and now the hour of retribution has arrived! Even as you killed, so shall you be slain! From the fleshless lips of the dead your doom has been pronounced, and we, the spirits of your victims, are empowered to carry out that sentence!"

Terror stricken, pale as though already the dead men the Specter Chief declared they should so soon become, the two wretched criminals stared at the ghostly band. Even had not their jaws been gagged, they could have made no reply, so great was their terror. For the moment they believed these were indeed the avenging spirits of the murdered dead.

"For three years you have been left in peace by your innocent victim," resumed the white chief, his voice seeming to grow more unearthly, more chilling and blood-curdling. "For three years your worldly plans have prospered, and no doubt you often flattered yourself that there was no hereafter—no punishment for those who cunningly concealed their evil deeds; but if the blow was withheld, none the less surely did it hang above your heads, even when you deemed yourselves the most secure. Not from motives of pity or mercy, for your heinous crimes deserved neither the one nor the other. Not because the blood had dried up, or ceased to cry out for vengeance on those who caused it to flow. Not because the dread sin was forgotten in the lapse of time. For none of these reasons, but for this:

"To sharpen the blow when it should fall; to render your defeat the more perfect, your anguish the more intense; to lay you low when you seemed the most happy and prosperous, when you had the most to lose, when you least expected to feel the vengeance of your victims."

"That hour has come, and with it come the executioners!"

The Specter Chief ceased speaking and waved his gauntleted hand. His spectral assistants glided forward and their hands closed on the two doomed wretches.

The Specter Chief turned away and stooped before the massive iron safe. A moment later the bolts fell with a click and the heavy door swung open, revealing the books and papers belonging to the firm.

Even in that moment, when he believed that death, horrible and unavoidable, stared him full in the face, a groan of agony rose in the throat of Colonel Carey as he beheld the white chief swiftly sorting over the documents, selecting some, destroying others without mercy.

He had opportunity given him for but the one glance, then the White Crows turned him over on his face, their gloved hands working swiftly, thoroughly.

When first assaulted the partners had been bound hand and foot. Now the avengers passed a stout line through these bonds, drawing their hands back and their feet upward, until the four members almost met, when they were firmly bound thus.

Two of their number mounted on the table, and with short chisels attacked the ceiling, which was formed of ship-lap lumber, instead of lath-and-plaster. In a few moments they

tore off one of the boards, laying the joists bare, then turned toward their chief, who had just completed the rifling of the safe to his apparent satisfaction.

"Finish your work," he rumbled, and without any more delay the ends of the lassoes were passed up to the shapes on the table, who passed them over the exposed joists, then descended with the loose ends in their hands.

Another motion, and the partners were hauled from the floor, almost to the ceiling, all their weight resting on the thongs which encircled their wrists and ankles, producing excruciating pain.

Another signal, and the White Crows removed the table, bringing bundles of lightwood from the inner room, which they scattered on the floor beneath the prisoners, then poured oil over it all before touching off a match.

Instantly the flames sprung up, darting upward as though eager to reach the helpless forms suspended from the ceiling.

"Behold the doom decreed by your innocent victims, foul assassins!" rumbled the Specter Chief. "You gave them no chance to escape, so you shall have none. We will watch hard by until the end comes. If there be any attempt at rescue, we will foil it, by force of arms, if needs be. But, in one respect we are more merciful than you were: we give you light by which you can measure the approach of death and gauge your prayers for forgiveness. Adieu!"

All this time Budd Painter had watched the strange and terrible scene, with widely distended eyes, unable to utter a sound or make a move. But now several of the White Crows cut the cords which held him to the chair, and hurried him into the inner room. The door closed behind them, and the two helpless wretches were left to face a terrible death alone.

Brighter grew the flames. Higher shot their tongues, and already the garments of the partners began to scorch and smoke with the intense heat. Wildly they writhed, but in vain.

The bonds held fast. And higher leaped the forked flames—more intense grew their torture.

CHAPTER IX.

FLEEING FROM THE WRATH TO COME.

FOR a few minutes the two men who hung suspended above the crackling flames, experienced all the tortures of the damned, none the less excruciating from being for the most part purely mental.

The heat of the fire beneath them was beginning to scorch their garments and redden their flesh, but this was nothing to what they saw in the immediate future. The fire was beginning to take hold on the flooring and to spread in all directions. The door and windows were so carefully closed that long before sufficient light to alarm the citizens could escape, their fate would surely be sealed. Truly they were doomed—doomed to a death even more frightful than that for which they were condemned.

Writhing, struggling until it seemed as though his arms would be twisted from their sockets, Colonel Carey endeavored to burst his bonds, to work the gag from between his jaws. Nor was his comrade in misery any less violent.

Round and round swung their bodies, now clumping together, now recoiling, to come in contact with increased violence, low, inarticulate howls rising in their throats as they vainly sought to yell for help. Then—how it came about, he could never tell—the thong holding the gag between the jaws of Colonel Carey, gave way, and a wild, frightful screech burst from his lips that caused the very walls of the building to tremble.

Again and again he yelled for aid, so terribly excited, so thoroughly crazed by the imminence of their peril, as to be unconscious of the fact that his first cry had an answer from the outside. Not until a heavy blow resounded against the door, and a loud voice demanded what was the row, did he realize that the alarm had been given.

"Help!" he howled, his tones so hoarse as to barely articulate. "We're roasting! Kick in the door! For the love of Heaven—make haste!"

A loud yell from the man without, brought speedy help, and then the stout door shock and rattled beneath the force which was brought to bear upon it. Higher the forked-tongued flames leaped, wilder the suspended wretches struggled, almost suffocating in the smoke and heat which whirled upward from the fire, louder grew the cries, the curses, the prayers of the scorching assassin!

With a crash, the door gave way and a half-dozen men tumbled headlong into the room, quickly followed by others. The firebrands were kicked out of the building, the flames stamped out, while strong arms eased the suspended bodies while other hands cut them free.

Bodies they seemed, and nothing more, for their overtired brains had given way, the moment the door broke down, and they saw that they were rescued from what had seemed inevitable death.

Intense was the excitement of the rescuers, as they recognized whom they had set free; many the wondering surmises as to what it could all mean; when one of their number, who had

been busied trying to restore Colonel Carey to consciousness, uttered a surprised cry and stood erect, pointing to a card of smoke-stained paper which was securely pinned to the breast of the mining king, and which had until now escaped their notice.

"Look!" he cried, in tones of wonder and doubt. "Can it be? Can *they* be the frightful wretches this card makes out?"

He tore the paper from its fastenings, and by the red light which came from the still glowing floor, he read:

"To whomsoever may chance to rescue these demons from the punishment they so richly deserve, a word of warning.

"They are impostors, for the very name you know them by are stolen. They are assassins, for by their devilish cunning and pitiless ferocity, the original discoverers of what is now called Death-Trap Diggings, met their death. They blew out the dam and let the waters down on the sleeping camp. They guarded the passes by which alone escape was possible, and mercilessly slaughtered those who might have cheated the raging waters. And all this for the gold the unfortunates had won by hard toil and many privations!"

"We, the spirits of those murdered ones, have doomed them to suffer death; but not in this shape. We will keep watch, and if discovery should not come of its own accord, in time to save their evil lives, we will raise the alarm. Torment, and not death, is their present portion.

"THE GHOSTS OF GOLDEN VALLEY."

For a brief space the auditors stood in silence, pale-faced, wild-eyed, literally stunned by this terrible charge brought against the man whom they had looked upon as little short of being demi gods. But then a hoarse voice cried out:

"It's all a bloody lie! Who should know that better'n we do, who've lived by these gents for three years an' over?"

"It is the gospel truth!" came a stern voice from outside the building. "Who benefited most by the re-discovery of Death-Trap Diggings? Who was the first to strike a bonanza? Who dropped onto the richest leads? The only leads that have proved worth working? How came they so lucky, unless they had marked them out beforehand?"

Swift and impetuous came the words, and so wholly unexpected were they that not a man stirred to identify the bold speaker until the voice abruptly died away. Nor even then, until Jeffreys uttered a fierce shout.

"Catch that lying cur!" he snarled, staggering to his feet and snatching a pistol from the belt of one of his rescuers. "A thousand dollars for him alive! He can tell who did this foul work! Out and catch him!"

He was one of the first to dash through the ruined door, pistol in hand, but there was nothing to be seen save a few men hastening toward the building, drawn thither by the wild rumors which were agitating all Death-Trap Diggings.

They had met no one fleeing. All search proved useless. The owner of that accusing voice was gone; but not so the seed he had sown. On more than one face rested suspicion. Even though they escaped further attacks from the Ghosts of Golden Valley, the magnates of Death-Trap Diggings would never more command the confidence or rule so royally over the citizens as they had in the past.

Joe Jeffreys saw this, and his pale face became hard-set. He saw that their case was growing most desperate, and as the rescuers finished extinguishing the smoldering embers, his evil brain was working rapidly.

As for Colonel Carey, usually the leader in whatever they did, he seemed stupefied, his brain dazed by the tortures they had undergone before help came. He sat in the chair which Budd Painter had occupied, watching every movement made by the men, but apparently without the power of comprehension.

"This is an ugly affair, men," said Jeffreys, his voice sounding cold and mechanical with the powerful restraint he was obliged to put upon it, to conceal his agitation. "It must be sifted to the bottom, and the authors of this dastardly outrage brought to justice. I will ask your kind aid in the morning. But now—you can see how utterly my partner is prostrated by the tortures he has undergone. We can do nothing while he is in that state. He needs quiet and such nursing as I can give him last alone."

"You see," with a hard laugh as he pointed toward the open safe; "our visitors were mortal enough to carry off all the gold we had stored in yonder. But I reckon our credit is good for what you may call for down-town. Take this," hastily scrawling a few words on the back of a card, and handing it to the nearest man. "Call for what you want; don't be sparing; we'll let it go on the account when those hell-hounds are hunted down, with your kind aid. Good-evening."

"But sha'n't we watch the place?" asked one of the miners. "Mebbe them cusses may come back an'—"

"If they should, they will meet with a warmer reception than they gave us," with a hard, grim laugh. "We'll not be caught twice in the same trap."

Without any further remark, the men turned

away, not sorry to have the chance for talking the strange affair over together without restraint.

Jeffreys closed the splintered door, then strode back to the side of his stupefied partner, grasping his shoulder and roughly shaking him, as he grated, angrily:

"Brace up, man! Is this the time to give way like an old woman? Rouse yourself, or cursed if I don't leave you to fight these devils alone!"

"Devils? Yes, they're devils—ghosts—the spirits of those poor devils we mur—"

With a savage oath, Jeffreys grasped his throat and cut short the feeble, quavering speech.

"You infernal idiot! rouse up! Do you know what you are saying? Suppose some outsider was to hear you say that?"

For a moment Colonel Carey stared vacantly into the angry face which bent over him; then the light of reason returned to his eyes, and with a start he flung off the hand and leaped to his feet, glaring madly around him, as though looking for the ghostly avengers.

"You haven't let them get away?" he demanded, turning with a scowl upon Jeffreys.

"It's their death or ours now—"

"They're gone, safe enough!" with a short, hard laugh; "and I, for one, am not anxious to have them come back very soon."

"Tell me what happened; I can't remember—it's all a fog!" muttered Colonel Carey, passing a hand over his eyes.

"In the other room then. There's no telling who's watching us here, and whatever we do must be kept secret between us two," said Jeffreys, taking up the lamp and leading the way into the other apartment, Colonel Carey following.

The room was empty, save for themselves. The shutter of the one rear window was open. At one end of the rude lounge, lay a blood-stained pillow, where they had placed Muscovado Jack, but he, too, had vanished.

Jeffreys shut and fastened the shutter, placing the lamp on a small stand. His face was pale as he turned to his mate.

"Those hell-hounds have carried off Muscovado Jack, as well as that infernal Budd Painter. The next time it will be you and I, if we're fools enough to remain here and give them another whack at us!"

The old-time courage and decision flashed back into the face and eyes of the colonel, and his voice was sharp and stern as he muttered:

"You're right, Jeff. We must pull out of this in a hurry. Not for good, though. I won't be driven away from my property for good and all. We'll fight cunning with cunning—trickery for trickery. We'll pull out to-night, and send back men with nerve and wit enough to solve this infernal mystery. Then it will be our turn to strike—and strike home!"

"Good enough!" muttered Jeffreys, as their hands met in a firm grip. "I began to fear you had lost your nerve, but I see you are your old self once more. You're right. We'll have to skin out and lay low for a bit, until we can take soundings. And the sooner we set to work the better for our health."

A few more words passed between them, but these do not require recording here, since enough has been said to show the line they proposed following out of the mists.

Looking to their weapons they extinguished the light, then cautiously opened the shutter. Carefully as they scanned the ground beyond, they failed to see any sign of their enemies, and then they stole through the window and glided away.

They made their way toward the stables where their riding horses were kept, keeping a close lookout to see if they were being dogged. Just before the stables were reached, they came across Breachy Bull and his "side partner," Conky Peters, emerging from a saloon, and an additional safeguard occurred to the mind of the colonel.

He called the russians to one side, where they could not be seen nor overheard by any chance passer-by, and said:

"We've got a clew to those devils who butchered poor Dick, and we mean to follow it up without delay, but we don't want to run any risk of giving the alarm prematurely. You two go and get our horses—I'll write an order for them—and meet us at the point of rocks. Be lively, now!"

"We'll be thar afore you kin wink twicet, boss," said the half-drunken russian, taking the order and hastening away.

"That's a good move," said Jeffreys, approvingly. "There won't be much risk of any of those bloodhounds noticing us take saddle from there, and once clear of town, I reckon our hands can keep our heads."

"If not we deserve to lose them," said Colonel Carey, once more his old self, cool and self-reliant.

Still keeping a keen lookout against being dogged, the two men made their way to the point of rocks, and waited for the coming of their horses. This was not long delayed, for it was well known that Breachy Bull was in the employ of the firm, and the written order he

bore was amply sufficient to insure immediate service.

While waiting it was decided not to warn the men of what their real purpose was, lest the secret should accidentally leak out, and when the animals were brought they mounted and rode away with only a simple caution to the men not to allude to their journey until they heard from them again.

Along the road at a steady trot, their spirits growing lighter with every rod they placed behind them, the two men rode, feeling that they had thoroughly outgeneraled the foe.

But their congratulations came too soon.

They were passing through the precise portion of the stage-road where Muscovado Jack met the Specters for the first time, when the bushes parted, and two lassoes whirled through the air, closing over the doomed men's heads, dragging them from the saddle with stunning force, before they could fairly realize their danger. And long ere their senses returned, they were bound hand and foot on their animals, with a ghostly rider supporting them on each side, while a third was bathing their faces with whisky to restore their consciousness. And thus it was when their eyes opened again.

The Specter Chieftain moved before them, speaking coldly:

"Poor fools! did you think to escape us so easily? Did I not warn you that your every step was watched, your every thought divined even as it found shape in your evil brains? If you failed to believe my words then, let this prove them.

"It was my voice that first called men to your aid, when you thought your doom insured. I aided to burst open the door and cut you down. It was my hand that pinned that card of denunciation on your breast, Clay Benedict. I did this, because your hour has not yet arrived; because you have not yet suffered all the torture placed against your name.

"But the time is fast approaching, and when the hour does strike, Satan himself cannot save you!"

At a motion of his gauntleted hand, bandages were fastened over their eyes, and then they were conducted swiftly away, back to Death-Trap Diggings, as they firmly believed.

Ere long, the ghostly cavalcade came to a halt, and some little time was spent, just how, the prisoners could not tell. Then the ride was resumed, to come to another check; when they were sure the town must be close at hand.

Their bonds were cut, and they were lifted to the ground. A gag was placed between each pair of jaws, and their hands were firmly fastened behind their backs. Then the voice of the White Chief hissed in their ears:

"You are going back to your office. We will leave you there, but you will be under close watch and ward. If a cry or a sound escapes you before day dawns, you will be borne away to meet your fate, without further parley. In the morning you will be set free: but death awaits any attempt to flee from Death-Trap Diggings without our consent."

Five minutes later, and they were left inside the office.

CHAPTER X.

PUTTING HIS FATE TO THE TEST.

THEIR hands bound behind them, their eyes bandaged, and gags between their jaws, the two partners lay helpless on the blackened floor of the office, throughout the remainder of that never-to-be-forgotten night. Though their feet were left at liberty, they dared not attempt to flee against the stern warning of their mysterious enemy, who had given them each ample evidence of his powers.

They knew that it must be dawn, though the bandages kept all light from their eyes, for they could detect a growing murmur of sounds in the town, and then they fairly held their breath as they heard footsteps approaching the office.

Did those sounds herald the return of their enemies, or was it the coming of friends to set them free once again?

"Now I will be durned!" ejaculated a well-known voice, as the footsteps ceased abruptly at the office entrance. "The boss and the cunnel, or I'm a howlin' liar!"

Not the Specters, but the whisky-roughened voice of their henchman, Breachy Bull; and both Colonel Carey and Joe Jeffreys began rolling to and fro, trying to call on him for help.

Whatever his other qualities and failings, Bull was no fool, and whipping out a knife, he quickly set the two men at liberty, then lugged a whisky-bottle from his pocket and pressed them to partake of its contents.

"It's the best in town, an' bought with your own dust, so it ort to be good," he said, apologetically. "It'll serve fer to ile your jawin' tackle, anyhow, or I wouldn't make so free."

Poor as the poisonous stuff undoubtedly was, it tasted sweeter than nectar to the released men, just then, and when the flask again met the horny hand of its owner, there was little remaining in it, save air.

"You didn't come any too soon, my good fellow," said the colonel, rubbing his aching jaws with his hand. "Another hour of that,

and my goose would have been cooked, to a dead certainty! As it is, I feel like I had the lockjaw!"

"An' come to think, it's durn curious how I come to git here this airly," said Bull, scratching his head with one hand, and fumbling among his clothes with the other. "Us boys did a little more drinkin' a'ter you rid away, las' night, an' fer fear we'd git drunk, ef we kept up our lick much longer, we jest choked ourselves off, an' I hunted my virtuous couch, fer to ketch a good snooze-it-off afore you wanted me to git down to work ag'in."

"The next thing I knewed, it was plum' day-light, an' thar was a shaggy-headed galoot bendar' over me, sayin' that I was wanted up to the orifice monstrous bad. Afore I could git the cobwebs fa'rly out o' my peepers, the cuss was gone, an' I begun fer to 'low it was no more then the whisky gittin' in its work, an' was turnin' over to take another wink or two, when a durned big pin stuck me in the short ribs, an' slappin' at it fer a flea or skeeter, I hit this yer paper," drawing forth a folded note and handing it to the colonel.

"I ain't much on the spell, but I made out it was fer you, an' so I up an' moseyed this-a-way, as fast as I knewed how."

Colonel Carey snatched the paper from his hand, and tearing it open, hurriedly glanced over its contents. As he expected, it was in the now well-known hand of their enemy.

"It concerns you, as one of the firm," he said, with a short, hard laugh, passing the note to Jeffreys.

The latter took it, turning his back toward the curious Bull, as he devoured the contents, lest his face should betray more than he cared to have the rusliam suspect just then.

It began abruptly, without date or address, as follows:

"The day has dawned, and I send one of your fellow-rascals to set you at liberty; but my warning still holds good. You must remain in town. If you attempt to leave, you will be granted no further grace. The blow will fall and you will die the death of dogs."

"THE GHOSTS OF GOLDEN VALLEY."

As Jeffreys read these stern words, he turned and the eyes of the haunted men met. There was an inquiring look in his, a stern, hard gliter in those of the colonel.

"You mean to fight, then?" asked Jeffreys.

"To the death!" was the hard response. "We've tried running, and it don't pan out worth a cent. We know that cursed blood-hound speaks the truth in that respect; we'll see if he lies in the other."

"Bull, as you must begin to feel, there's devil broth a-brewing for those who had a hand in that little affair of the dam, over yonder. Just who it is that's stirring up the mud, I don't know, but this much is flat; we've got to fight or levant. I won't try the last, while I can pull trigger, and I don't believe you or any of the boys come of running stock."

"You're boss. What you say, that we'll do, or bu'st somethin' wide open in the 'tempt,' was the blunt response.

"Good enough! Go pass the word to the boys, but only to those you are willing to bet your life on. Hold yourselves in readiness for orders, and keep sober. Jeffreys and I will consult together, and when we have decided on our plans, we'll give you the cue."

"Come, Jeff; I'm after some grub. I feel as hollow as an old log! We can talk matters over while stowing away a cargo, with more comfort than here."

Together the partners left the office, after locking the safe and closing the shattered door as well as circumstances would admit, then made the best of their way to the hotel at which they were accustomed to take their meals.

They were the center of all eyes as they passed through the street, but this occasioned them little wonder. Of course the events of the night just passed were public property, and in their scorched and blackened garments, they could not expect but attracting attention.

They at once passed to their private room, only pausing to order fool and liquor sent up to them, and when this came, they locked the door and performed their toilets, then sat down to table.

"We've got to fight; so far, you're straight as a die," said Jeffreys, after the keen edge of their appetites had been turned. "But how? That's the question."

"You haven't forgotten what I was telling you, just before the mill went up in smoke?" asked Colonel Carey.

"About that woman, Madam Crimson?"

The colonel nodded, as he refilled his glass.

"As she chooses to call herself—yes. More than ever I am inclined to think she is Bertha Burnham. We've seen and heard enough to make it perfectly clear that some one escaped the trap we set off, over yonder. It could only be her—"

"Or Budd Painter," quickly interposed Jeffreys.

"I can't believe that, even yet," with dogged disbelief.

"Who can that infernal rascal be, if not him?"

"A tool—a part of this devilish mummery. I believe he is acting under her orders, just as those devils in white are doing. She found a man that looked something like Budd Painter, and gave him his part to play. She wasn't quite sure we were the men she wanted, and so shaped his course, to find out whether or no she was working the right lead. If it was him, do you think he would have given me a chance to escape?"

Jeffreys was silenced, if not convinced, and Carey added:

"Last night I made an appointment with Madam Crimson for to-day, and I mean to keep it, taking you with me. I've given her no cause to think I suspect her of being other than she appears on the surface, and she will not be prepared for a blow of the sort I contemplate."

"You mean to find out who and what she is?"

"Ay! I'll tear the mask from her face, and if she is the one I suspect—if she is Bertha Burnham—I'll hold her as a hostage, as a safeguard against her gang!"

"It will be a risky piece of work," thoughtfully.

"Can you suggest a better scheme? Have we any other choice left us? We can't run—that was proven plainly enough last night. We can only fight; and this must be our first stroke, risk or no risk."

"I'll do my part, never fear. But I was thinking—if Madam Crimson is the one you think; if she is at the bottom of all this crooked luck, and is expecting a call from you—she will be mighty apt to have the cards stocked for you."

"That won't save her, once I get a square look at her face and find my suspicions are correct. She's a woman, and when she feels my grip on her, and my knife or pistol feeling for her heart, she'll hardly crowd us too far."

Discussing the subject, the plotters finished their meal, then lighted cigars and waited until Colonel Carey thought it time to put his bold project into execution.

They left the hotel together, well armed, their eyes keenly watching on every side to discover whether or no they were being dogged. If so, their enemies exhibited rare cunning and adroitness, for not the slightest evidence of spying could the partners detect in their apparently aimless stroll through town, and then, with a sudden change of course, Colonel Carey led the way to the building occupied by Madam Crimson.

The echo raised by his briskly-applied knuckles had not yet died away when the door was opened and the gambler queen stood before them, her musical voice bidding them enter.

"You are tardy, gentlemen," she said, with a light laugh, as they entered and the door closed behind them. "I have been expecting this visit for more than an hour."

"You are very kind, madam," said the colonel, with a low bow, more to conceal the peculiar expression which shot across his face than through courtesy, however. "Still, if I remember aright, there was no particular hour mentioned when you were pleased to grant me the great favor of an interview."

The eyes gleamed brightly through the apertures in the blood-red mask, and that low, provoking laugh was repeated.

"My dear colonel, you cover me with confusion. Upon my word, I had completely forgotten—are you sure you are not the one in error? Did I promise to receive you here to-day?"

"You most certainly did," was the quick response, and though he could hardly realize it, the colonel felt a sharp pang at his heart as he spoke. "If not, I should never have dared present myself thus."

"And because of that promise on my part you are here?" then asked the gambler queen. "You had no other object in view? No other business with me?"

"Is not that a sufficient inducement?" and as he softly uttered the words the colonel moved nearer the woman in red. "You hinted at forgetfulness, and yet you say you were expecting me an hour earlier?"

"Pardon, my dear sir," retreating a step, with a low courtesy; "I did not particularize you; my statement included Mr. Jeffreys, as one of the firm of Carey & Jeffreys."

"You deal in enigmas, madam; may I ask an explanation?"

"Certainly," with frankness, as she held out a note. "I found that on my dressing-table this morning early. How it came there I do not pretend to say; but the facts are as I tell you. Of course I opened and read it, though there was no address on the cover. Read and you will see why I expected to receive an early call from you gentlemen."

Despite his strong nerves, Colonel Carey gave a convulsive start as he took the paper and caught a glimpse of the bold handwriting it contained. Thrice had he seen the same penmanship, and he knew what the signature would be before his rapidly-devouring eyes came to it.

"MADAM CRIMSON:—Early this morning, you will receive a business visit from the partners of the firm, Carey & Jeffreys. They will desire to borrow money from you, for the purpose of rebuilding their mills.

If you lend to them, you will share the ruin which is sure to overtake them. We will break up your business here in Death-Trap Diggings. We will tear the mask from your face and reveal the truth. You know best whether or no you can afford to run that risk, so take warning in time and govern yourself accordingly.

"THE GHOSTS OF GOLDEN VALLEY."

"Mysterious and dramatic and all that, isn't it?" asked Madam Crimson with a careless laugh, as Colonel Carey glanced from the paper to her eyes. "Though the writer predicts ruin for you, he must be a friend in disguise, or he would never forbid a woman to do you a service; or else he is lamentably ignorant of woman's great virtue—contrariness!"

"Then you will lend us this money?" asked Carey with a quick glance toward his partner, which that worthy tried in vain to solve satisfactorily to himself.

"On the security of your mines, of course," promptly. "I am a woman of business. I came to Death-Trap Diggings for the sole purpose of making money sufficient to enable me to carry out a long-cherished scheme. I have a large sum lying idle, and will be only too glad to invest it where it will be making its own expenses."

"You mystify me more and more, the oftener I see you," said Colonel Carey, his voice growing hard and metallic. "Who are you? What brought you to this place?"

"Who am I?" with a light laugh. "I am Madam Crimson. I am a woman gambler. I am a sorceress—would you have me tell your fortune, my pretty gentleman?"

She waved her hand, and as by magic, the room was cast into perfect darkness. An oath broke from the lips of the colonel, and he sprung toward the spot where she had stood when he last saw her, but his angry grasp closed on empty air.

"We're tricked!" he snarled, savagely, drawing his weapons and leaping back to the wall.

"On guard, Jeffreys!"

"Strike a match!" cried Jeffreys, setting the example. "Woman or devil, she must still be within reach!"

At that instant one side of the room was dimly lighted up for a circular space of a few feet in diameter, and the sputtering matches fell from their startled hands.

For in the center of that lighted spot, there sprung into existence a wondrously life-like picture—a tableau which both of the startled men instantly recognized, and from which Colonel Carey shrank with a low cry of terror.

A massive boulder; a narrow channel of foaming, tumbling water; two men, one grasping the other by the throat as he drove a long knife into his bosom. And the face of the assassin was that once worn by Colonel Carey!

Slowly the picture faded away, to be almost immediately followed by another, dim at first, but gradually growing more and more distinct, until it seemed to stand out with all the clearness of life. And it, too, was one familiar to the two pale-faced criminals who crouched at the further end of the room, grasping their weapons, but for the time being without the power of using them.

The Golden Valley at midnight; the tops of the hills lighted by the rays of the rising moon, but with the basin shrouded in gloom, through which the phantom-like shapes were at first but faintly distinguishable.

A fleeting glimpse of the tents, the white-tinted wagons, the forms of the wearied gold-diggers lying asleep around the smoldering camp-fire; then a clearer view of two men near the foot of the dam, one bending forward as though trying to pierce the gloom, the other standing a little to the rear, striking the unprotected head with a revolver. Dimly seen for a moment; then the light flooded the scene, and once more the face of the assassin was that of Colonel Carey, when he called himself Clay Benedict.

One after another, pictures, some dim, others fully lighted up by the spectral glow, passed before their staring eyes as they crouched there in the corner, each tableau illustrating some well-remembered episode of that black night, three years ago, and in each one there was revealed the handsome face of Clay Benedict.

There was the explosion which rent the dam asunder and precipitated the foaming waters upon the doomed miners; there was pictured the terrible fight for life which one or two of the fated wretches made against the flood; and there, with a frightful vividness, was produced the death of the simple giant, the vain pleading attitude of the helpless lad on his knees, with clasped hands uplifted, while above him stood the figure of Clay Benedict with leveled pistol.

"These are the crimes which stand recorded against your name, Clay Benedict!" uttered a solemn tone, as the soul-sickening tableau slowly faded away, leaving the room in utter darkness. "For these crimes you have been condemned to suffer death. Would you gaze upon the fate in store for you?"

Wrought to desperation, Colonel Carey leapt to his feet and rushed forward, discharging his pistol in the direction from whence came that somber tone; but he struck against what seemed

a wall of iron, the force of contact hurling him back to the floor, bruised, almost senseless.

"Bah! silly cur!" cried the voice, filled with bitter scorn and mockery. "You struggle in vain. You walked blindly into the snare set for you, and must suffer the consequences.

"Once more, would you behold the doom which the Ghosts of Golden Valley have pronounced? Behold—and tremble!"

The spectral light returned, and once more a vivid tableau started forth upon the screen.

A narrow, oblong basin, with walls of rock rising abruptly on either side; from one end a cascade of water falls in a silver sheet over the rocks; at the opposite end is a massive gate, formed of timbers, completely barring the escape of the waters which seem to be rapidly filling up the little basin.

In the center of the miniature lake four stakes are planted, with a bar near the top, forming rude crosses. On each of these crosses are bound the figures of men, facing each other in double rank, two of them so that their faces show distinctly to the wretches who stare like wild beasts on the terrible picture, for they recognize their own countenances.

"By water you murdered, by water shall ye die!" came the stern voice, ringing like the knell of doom in their ears.

"Not yet, curse you!" howled Carey, again leaping to his feet. "Up, Jeffreys, you cur! We'll beat 'em yet!"

Like magic the light vanished, and strong hands grappled with the half-crazed wretches.

CHAPTER XI.

TOUCHING A RUSTED CHORD.

MADLY, desperately the two men struggled with their unseen foes, but their wildest efforts were all in vain. Their arms had been grappled at the start, twisted behind them and handcuffs applied to their wrists. Thus prevented from drawing knives or using the pistols with which they had leaped forward, hindered from exerting their strength to any advantage, there could be but one result; they were thrown to the floor and wrapped in strong cords from head to foot.

Yet they knew they were fighting for the only hope of their lives, and only yielding when their senses reeled, then seemed swallowed up by the blackest night.

How long they remained in this unconscious state, they had no means of knowing, but when their senses were restored, it was all at once, instead of by degrees.

A curiously indistinct light glimmered before their eyes, seeming a compound of sunshine and lamplight, and for a brief space they were unable to distinguish any particular object. Their brains seemed dazed as though still under the influence of some powerful drug, and though there was a dim, indistinct memory of some deadly peril troubling them, they made no attempt to flee at first.

Then, as their eyes grew accustomed to the peculiar light, Colonel Carey recognized the figure of the woman in red, and like a revelation it all returned to him. He tried to cry out—he strove to leap forward and clutch the woman who had so adroitly lured them into the snare—but in vain. And then he realized that he was bound, that a gag filled his jaws, and the slightest exercise of any faculty beyond those of sight and feeling, was simply impossible.

A side-glance showed him his partner, also bound and helpless, trussed up alongside, staring with widely distended eyes at the masked woman beyond.

The apartment in which she sat, was trimmed in the same blood-red color as the mask covering her face and the sweeping dress she wore—floor, walls and ceiling.

She raised one gloved hand, and in obedience to the silent signal, a portion of the red hangings parted and a number of figures entered, clothed in pure white, and the wild eyes of the two helpless wretches grew wilder as they recognized the weird uniform of the Ghosts of Golden Valley.

In their midst was a rough-dressed man, whose head was closely enveloped in a cloth, but whose limbs were at liberty.

At another motion of the red-gloved hand, this man was placed in a chair opposite her, and facing the darkened portion of the room where the two doomed wretches were bound. The cloth was removed from his head, and the white-robed figures ranged themselves to the rear, erect and motionless as though carved from stone.

The rough-dressed man glared around him in half-defiance, half-fear, his hands mechanically fumbling at his waist, as though in quest of the weapons he was so well accustomed to using; but then Madam Crimson spoke, her voice clear and soft:

"You have nothing to fear, for you are among friends, who owe you far too great a debt of gratitude to even dream of harming you, Mr. Painter."

As she spoke, one of his hands was raised tremblingly to his bullet-scarred brow, and the old vacant look came into his bloodshot eyes.

"I've hearn that voice afore—but whar? Ef

them pesky bumble-bees would only keep shet fer a bit, so I could think!"

"Do not try to think. Let your brain rest, and your memory may float back again, clear as in the days of old. Close your eyes, if you will; do nothing but listen, and I will try to brush away the puzzling mists through which you have been so blindly groping."

There was something peculiarly soothing in her voice, and gradually the strained muscles relaxed, the troubled look grew less intense, and half-reclining in his chair, Budd Painter feebly muttered:

"Budd Painter by name, an' a full-blown painter by natur'! I'm a Hard Man from 'Way Back—a tough citizen from the t'other side o' yender, an'—I—kin—"

His voice sunk into an incoherent drawl, and he seemed like a man under the spell of mesmerism as he gazed dreamily into the glittering eyes of Madam Crimson.

"So!" she exclaimed, her voice plainer, clearer. "Listen, while I lift the curtain of the past.

"You were a wild, reckless, lawless man, in those days, and acknowledged no master save your own ungoverned will. Yet you were not all bad. Beneath your rough exterior you carried a heart that could feel for the helpless and unfortunate.

"One day you came to a peaceful little valley, where a few poor people were digging gold. They were afraid you intended to betray them and wrest away the wealth they had accumulated with so much toil and danger. They acted harshly, perhaps, but no more so than any others would have done in their place. They meant to keep you as a guest, until their work was done, then set you at liberty.

"But there was one man among them, who was a merciless demon at heart—"

"I know—I kin see that much!" muttered Budd Painter, the vacant light in his eyes beginning to light up. "He shot me when my head was turned! It was a coward trick—a mighty low-down piece o' dirt! But I'll git even! I swore it then, an' never yit did I go back on my word. But I can't find him—I can't find him, nowhars!"

"You shall find him—you shall drink your fill of revenge, if you but listen to me. Unless you listen, I will go away and leave you to do battle with the terrible mists and cobwebs again."

Budd Painter fell back in his seat, his teeth tightly clinched, his sinewy fingers gripping the wood with a force that almost caused it to crack and crumble.

"There was one among that doomed band into whicse power you fell by that treacherous shot, whose heart softened with pity at your miserable condition. It was a woman—but little more than a girl, young and soft-hearted. She did what she could to make your lot less bitter. She washed and bandaged your hurts. She put a shade over your head to intercept the burning rays of the sun at noon tide. She brought you cool, fresh water, she fed you choice morsels, just as she might have cared for a helpless child; for then, you were so strong, so furious, the miners feared to set your limbs at liberty even enough for you to feed yourself.

"She did all this, but it was like caring for a savage. Your face ever wore that fierce, sullen scowl. You never spoke to ask a favor, answer a question, or say thank you for her services. At times she grew disgusted, and felt tempted to give over her efforts; but as often she grew ashamed of herself, and redoubled her efforts to make your life endurable.

"Then came a black and terrible night. The man who shot you down was plotting evil against his pretended friends all the time, and aided by the men whom you had led to the vicinity, in whom he recognized old friends and fellow-criminals, he carried out his blood-curdling scheme of murder and theft.

"There was a dam which held back the waters from the little valley in which the doomed wretches were working to secure a competence for their loved ones, and he—the demon who shot you—resolved to blow this up, and thus cover his atrocious crimes.

"And why did he do all this? Not for lust of gold alone, though no doubt that had its influence; but because the girl who ministered to your wants, with whom he pretended to be in love, rejected him when he asked for her hand, and told him she was already a wife.

"He murdered the man on watch over the dam; he lured the gray-haired father of the woman he pretended to love out of the tent where she lay sleeping, and most foully assassinated him; he robbed the iron treasure-chest, then carried the poor girl away, leaving her bound and gagged among the rocks, while he hastened to finish his diabolical work.

"He caused the dam to be blown up. The mad waters came down with a mighty rush and roar, but even above that mad roar rose the terror-stricken cries of the poor beings who only awoke to die."

"I hearn it—I was thar—I kin see it all jest as I did then," muttered Budd Painter, clasping his head with his hands, his eyes glowing like coals of fire. "It begins to come back—I

kin see clearer—all but the names an' the faces. Thar the mists hangs yit—thicker'n ever."

"Have patience and they will melt and disappear," said Madam Crimson, leaning forward and waving her red-gloved hand.

Once more the Hard Man from 'Way Back yielded to her strange influence, and shrunk lower in his seat; but the bright light did not fade from his eyes as at first.

"You were there, as you say. Never once had you yielded an inch, though day after day the gray-haired leader—father to the poor girl who ministered so patiently to your wants—offered to set you free so far as bonds were concerned, if you would only promise to keep the peace and not pass out of the valley. You never spoke or made sign that you heard him, but you were working doggedly to make your escape and secure your revenge on those who had held you captive so long.

"And on that terrible night, you succeeded. You freed your hands and then your feet from your bonds. You were stealing away, when you caught sight of the man who shot you, creeping toward the dam, and you dogged his footsteps, meaning to slay him. But when you divined his purpose, you held your hand and let him assassinate the man on duty above the dam. Why should you interfere to save him? Was he not one of those who had bound you like a dog?"

"You watched his movements all through. You heard him instruct his tools how to fire the mine which was to destroy the dam; you saw him lure the gray-haired leader to his doom; saw him rob the treasure chest in company with his mate; saw him bear away the woman who had watched over you through all those days.

"You saw all this, yet you did not raise a hand to prevent the crimes. You watched and waited—"

"For what?" suddenly interrupted Budd Painter, his eyes aglow, his countenance working strangely. "I kin tell you. I kin see through the clouds that fur. Beca'se thar was only one soul in the hull outfit that I wouldn't 'a' murdered with my own hand ef that cussed cur hedn't tuck the job onto his own hands! An' she was safe enough out o' the way o' the waters when the dam bu'sted. I swore he shouldn't harm her—nur he didn't never lay finger or eye onto her from the minnit he putt her down 'mongst them rocks!"

"True," added Madam Crimson, her voice growing clear and firm again, after that trembling break. "You watched your chance and stole her away from where that demon left her tied hand and foot, with a plaster over her mouth. You found a safe hiding-place far away in the rock-bills, and there watched and waited during the weary days he spent in searching for his lost treasure. You intended to foil him still further; you meant to pick off his comrades in sin, to secure the blood-stained gold, and then punish him, as his crimes deserved; for this you had suffered him to carry out his atrocious plot, thinking that failure in the very moment of his fancied triumph would be bitterest of all to him. But you did not do so—you smothered your hatred, you abandoned your revenge, you suffered him to escape with his ill-gotten wealth—why?"

"Because the frightful events of that night had crazed the brain of the poor girl whom you dared so much to rescue from the clutches of that demon. You dared not leave her for a moment, when her consciousness—not senses—returned in the gloomy little cave to which you bore her, lest she destroy herself. Those horrible death-cries were constantly ringing in her ears, and she had only one prayer; that a merciful God might take her to rejoin her poor father, her little brother.

"Then it was that her kindness of heart in showing you those little kindnesses while you were a helpless prisoner, met with their just reward. You watched over her and cared for her as tenderly, as devotedly as though she was your own child, and though her illness lasted for weeks, you never despaired, never once relaxed your efforts, but nursed her back to life and strength, though her mind remained a perfect blank.

"As her strength came back, you led her by gentle stages to the main trail, and finally joined a train of emigrants who were bound for Oregon. You told them just enough of the truth to awaken their keenest pity, and in their company you journeyed to Oregon, from thence to California, where you knew she had a husband living.

"It was a blind search, for as yet her mind was a blank, and she could give you no clew—you were even ignorant of the name her husband bore—but a kind Providence favored you, and by making good use of her maiden name, at length you found the man who believed she was still safe in the home where he had left her, long ago.

"At the sight of her husband, the poor girl burst into tears, and when she grew calm again, her memory was restored. But with it came another long and dangerous illness, and when she recovered once more, and asked for the man to whom she owed so much, it was only to hear that he had disappeared, had never been

seen since that memorable day when he brought to her her husband.

"All efforts to discover him were in vain for nearly a year, but then they met once more. He was lying very low, from the effects of a terrible fight, and all believed he was surely dying from his injuries. But his mind was clear, and then he told her the sad tale I have repeated to you, just now. Until then, she had been unable to tell her husband more than that she was alone in the world—that her father and brother had been foully murdered. He had tried hard to solve the mystery, but until you were found, he had nothing to work on.

"From you the names of all the demons engaged in that black deed were learned, and to his amazement, the husband discovered that one of them, or, at least, a man who bore the same name, was working for him, and without warning to you, he had him brought to the place where you lay, seemingly dying.

"No sooner did you set eyes on the wretch, than you leaped upon him, knocking him down with a chair, and before you could be taken away, the murderer was fatally injured.

"His name was Teddy Moran, and when he was confronted on his death-bed by the woman whom he and his had so bitterly wronged, he made full confession and confirmed the story you had told before him.

"He said that the two leaders had altered their personal appearance and dropped the old names, assuming others; that they had returned to the Golden Valley, and at that time were prospering in all their undertakings. He told their assumed names, and then died.

"All this took time to say, for he was lying very low, and able to speak only at long intervals. Meantime, you were taken worse, after your fight with Moran, and though you eventually recovered your strength, your mind was shattered, and you fled one night, without letting your friends know of your intention.

"They sought for you, but vainly. Then, when they abandoned all hopes of ever discovering you, they set out to avenge their dead on the assassins.

"They came here, and looked over the ground. They found their enemies rich, highly thought of, while they were unknown. To make an open accusation would be worse than useless.

"They resurrected the dead, and added trusty allies on whose courage and devotion they could implicitly depend, and trained them as the Specters of Death-Trap Diggings. Last night they began to work in earnest. They saved you from the duel with Dick Damper, by lassoing him and carrying him off, to serve another purpose. It was his hand that placed and fired the cartridges by which the dam was destroyed, and he merited a less manly death than from a shot by your hand.

"He was hung, when the mills of Carey & Jeffreys were destroyed, by the Ghosts of Golden Valley.

"Budd Painter, are the mists clearing away?"

"They're 'most gone! I kin 'member it all, now—all but the name an' face o' the dog that shot me!" muttered the Hard Man from 'Way Back, passing a hand across his eyes. "Ef I could only see him once more! Didn't I see him las' night?"

"You did," was the prompt reply. "You accused him of his crimes, and only for me he would have shot you like a dog. I saved your life then, because I knew the story of your past—look, Budd Painter!"

As she uttered the words, Madam Crimson rose erect and removed the blood-red mask from her face. The Hard Man from 'Way Back stared for a moment, then rose with a glad cry.

"I kin see it now!" the clouds is gone! You're her—the little woman I saved from those bloodhounds!"

"Ay!" and she turned her face, toward the spot where the two men were bound. "I am the woman you saved from those foul assassins! I am Bertha Burnham, Clay Benedict!"

"That's the name!" snarled Budd Painter, his sinewy fingers working convulsively, his eyes fairly ablaze. "That's the name! Ef I could only clap eyes onto him jest this once!"

Bertha Burnham—no longer Madam Crimson—waved one hand, and instantly a flood of light illuminated the alcove in which Clay Benedict and Jeff Archer were confined. Budd Painter followed the direction of her leveled finger, and recognizing his enemy, uttered a howl of insane fury as he darted forward—only to be repulsed by a stout iron grating which even more swiftly descended from the ceiling.

"Peace, good friend," said Bertha, touching his arm. "You shall drink deep of revenge, but not just now nor here."

A gurgling moan, then the head of Clay Benedict drooped!

CHAPTER XII.

THE DREAD DOOM FULFILLED.

FAR away from Death-Trap Diggings, in the heart of the dreary waste of rocks, the round orb'd moon was shining down upon a weird, gruesome spectacle.

Through the hills ran a slender stream of water, now winding between high rock walls, now plunging over a ledge to a small mountain-pool below, out of which flashed the active trout for the unwary flies or moths. On and on the miniature river rushed and tumbled and wound its way, until it poured in a thin sheet of shining silver over a crescent-shaped ledge and fell into a narrow, high-walled basin thirty feet below. Here the water spread out until it covered almost all of the small basin, eddying slowly round and round before finding exit at the lower end, where the rocks came still closer together, rising higher and more perpendicularly.

To the right and left of the waterfall, the rocks rose in almost regular steps to the top of the walls on either hand, not unlike the seats inclosing an amphitheater.

In the center of that mountain pool, four stout stakes had been implanted by the hands of man to be used for a terrible purpose. Across each stake was tied a shorter piece of timber, at right angles, thus forming of each a rude cross.

And as the clear light of the full moon shines down upon the mountain pool, those crosses are all occupied—to each one is bound a human being in the attitude first displayed by the Savior of mankind.

Ranged along each side of the waterfall, are strange, weird shapes, dressed in white from top to toe, with one exception; a woman whose garb shines blood-red.

"Clay Benedict, Jefferson Archer, Breachy Bull and Conky Peters," she is saying, her stern, cold voice ringing out above the music of the falling waters, the spray of which floats around her prominent figure in a misty veil. "The hour of your atonement has at length arrived.

"Three years ago, this very night, your crowning crime was committed. Three years ago to-night, you bade the waters overwhelm your innocent victims, that you might steal away their hard-earned gold. For three years you have prospered and enjoyed life after your own fashion, little thinking that the hand of fate was surely, if slowly, weaving the web in which you were doomed to fall, to pay the penalty of your dastardly deed.

"By water you killed, by water ye die!"

She raised her red-gloved hand, and a massive wooden gate descended between the rock walls at the further extremity of the little basin, closing all escape for the water until it should rise high enough to overleap the barrier.

"You gave your poor victims no time for thought, no time for muttering a prayer to their God. Death came so suddenly through your means, that they awoke from one sound slumber, only to be plunged into another whose waking comes not until the last trump sounds.

"The avengers of that crime are more merciful. You are granted time sufficient to realize your peril. Time enough to pray, if your lips can shape the unfamiliar words. Time enough to repent, if your sins were not so many, so black, so unpardonable in the sight of man and heaven.

"To you, Clay Benedict, is the greatest meed awarded, as to the blackest sinner of all. Your crimes require the longest time for repentance, and for that reason, among others, you will live to see your comrades in sin die one after the other. You can watch the water as it steals up their bodies, as it closes their lips and shuts off the breath of life from their nostrils. And from that you can calculate how much longer you will have to live, when the last of your partners have died!"

Her voice died away and she stood motionless with her ghostly attendants. Only the sound of the falling waters broke the stillness. Not a sound escaped the lips of the death-doomed criminals, for their tongues were fast fettered.

Ghastly pale were their faces and full of horror that in itself was almost sufficient to kill, to atone for the cruel deed because of which they were now to die. But stern and pitiless the avengers watched them, watched the bright waters as they stole slowly, surely up the lower limbs, lapping round the thighs, encircling the waists, creeping up and up, all the more frightful from their advance being so silent, so insidious.

Still higher, until the little ripples touched the lips of Conky Peters and Breachy Bull. Past the lips until little bubbles broke from their wildly distended nostrils—

Their brains almost crazed with horror, Clay Benedict and Jefferson Archer watched the last struggles for breath as the merciless waters eddied around the heads of their comrades; but they could not avert or close their eyes. They seemed to be looking upon their own end, and it held their gaze with a frightful fascination.

"Their crimes are expiated!" said the stern voice of Madam Crimson, as the faces of the lesser scoundrels sunk beneath the waters, and only their shaggy hair floated on the surface. "Your turn comes next, Jeff Archer! If you can recall any prayers, you have little time to waste."

Higher rose the waters. Inch by inch, so slowly to those who stood safely on the rock steps, so terribly fast to those who were crucified alive, helpless to flee, only able to watch the

cruel element as it rose to forever end for them the battle of life.

Up and up—higher and higher—and then Clay Benedict saw his fellow-sinner give up the ghost.

"And now it is *your* turn, Clay Benedict!" cried Madam Crimson, tearing off her mask and flinging it aside, revealing the pale, beautiful countenance of Bertha Burnham. "In ten minutes more, your soul will stand before its Maker, for final judgment. And there, ranged before you as your accusers, will be these witnesses, among others whom you have wronged."

The Specter Chief slowly removed his cowl, the moonlight falling upon the ghastly white countenance of Vernon Curtis.

Another hood came off, and the gray hairs, the rugged but comely face of Ralph Burnham confronted the horror-stricken condemned.

And one after the other the Ghosts of Golden Valley unmasked, to be in turn recognized by the last survivor of the Death-Trap Diggings massacre, as one of those whom he had so ruthlessly doomed to death, three years before.

Higher and higher rose the waters, silent and pitiless. Up and up. Now they encircle the throat of the nearly crazed wretch, reminding him of the touch of the hangman. Still higher. They lap against his chin. They touch his lips. They rise above them, and as his breath comes faster and faster, the cold water suddenly enters with the air, and suffocates him.

And thus the massacre of the Golden Valley was expiated!

When the new day dawned there was naught to tell of the merciless scene of retribution which the rock-bound basin had so recently witnessed. The doomed men were gone, with the rude crosses, the flood-gate and the avengers.

But far back in the hills might have been seen a pit-like grave, in which four bodies were lying, and around which half a score white-robed shapes and one blood-red one were standing in the first rays of the rising sun.

One after another Madam Crimson removed her outward attire and flung them into the grave.

"My work is done. I have no further need of these," she said. "And you, my husband, my good and faithful friends, can say the same. Let the Ghosts of Golden Valley, now that their cruel murder is avenged, go to their eternal rest."

One by one the white cowls were dropped upon the dead. And then followed the cunningly contrived masks which represented the murdered miners. Then the white uniform, bit by bit, until naught remained of the Ghosts of Golden Valley by which they could be recognized.

The grave was filled in, and then the avengers left the spot forever.

For nearly a month the strange vanishment of Colonel Claude Carey and his partner, Joseph Jeffreys, remained a perplexing mystery to all Death-Trap Diggings, and only for the dogged faithfulness of a few of their hired men, the mines would almost certainly have been "jumped" on the chance of their never returning. But then, one day, a fine-looking and well-dressed young man entered town and the rumor quickly gained circulation that a new owner for the mines had put in an appearance.

His name was registered at the hotel as Beamish Beaumont, from New York, and to those more nearly interested he showed the papers and title deeds which proclaimed him the successor of the firm of Carey & Jeffreys.

He took possession and immediately began the work of rebuilding the mills, displaying an energy and "git-up"—to employ the most expressive vernacular—that favorably impressed the citizens, who had feared Death-Trap Diggings had received its death-blow when the explosion occurred.

Another surprise awaited the citizens. Jimmy Du Bree, who had taken charge of the Red Light when Madam Crimson was suddenly called away on important business, the very eve that witnessed the departure of Carey & Jeffreys (in the company of the gallant colonel, venom-tongued rumor would have it) was taken into partnership by Beaumont, the gambling saloon being sold to an ambitious sport from down-country.

Budd Painter was installed as foreman of the works, and though occasionally his wild slogan was heard in Death-Trap Diggings, it was never in connection with a spree of his own, but only when some would-be big chief attempted to impose on another weaker than himself.

And when the mills were reopened, the stage brought a pale faced, lovely lady to Death-Trap Diggings, whom Beamish Beaumont met at the stage office and warmly embraced.

"My wife, gentlemen!" he said, proudly; then added, softly: "Bertha, these are your friends, for they have proved themselves friends of mine!"

THE END.

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